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LUTHER'S DOCTRINE OF THE WORD
AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR PREACHING

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Faculty of the
School of Theology at Claremont

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Religion

by
Gary George Hargroves
June 1973

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This dissertation, written by

Gary G. Hargroves

*under the direction of his Faculty Committee,
and approved by its members, has been presented
to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of
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DOCTOR OF RELIGION

Faculty Committee

James C. Hargroves
in Jack Cowan

Date

June 1973

K. Thomas Triller

PREFACE

The primary motivation behind this paper is a personal interest in preaching. This interest is the result of both the preaching I have heard and the task of having to preach myself during most of my college and seminary days. I've often questioned: What makes a good sermon good and a poor sermon poor?

To try to come to some understanding of the task of preaching, I set out to study and analyze a preacher of exceptional reputation. Having been impressed with the preaching of Paul Scherer, I attended Princeton Theological Seminary one year to study under him. Under Scherer's guidance, sermonic lectures and personal inspiration, I soon came to realize that there is no magic in good preaching. Although there are some procedures that can be helpful in sermon preparation and delivery, preaching itself is the proclamation of a message, not just a beautiful, inspiring speech.

Thus, I came to realize that a study of preaching is first and foremost a study of the message and how that message can be translated into a language that makes the message relevant to the contemporary hearer. Also, Paul Scherer was a Lutheran preacher in the finest sense. Luther would have been proud to have assigned Paul Scherer to one of his Evangelical Congregations in the early

1500's. Scherer was a student of the Scriptures, a master with the languages including Greek, Hebrew and Latin and a man of personal and physical character who had a flair for preaching.

It was through Paul Scherer that I became acquainted with Martin Luther. And even though I had great respect for Scherer, I saw that it was Luther who was the master preacher; and that a serious study of preaching should focus on Luther rather than Scherer as its primary source and teacher.

For Luther, God's message is God's Word. The two are synonymous. Thus, it became clear that the first step was to spell out the meaning and content of God's Word and how that Word relates itself to our contemporary situation. The heart of this paper, the first five chapters, deals with God's Word. However, since in Luther's thinking God's Word is all of theology, some limitations had to be made. In making the limitations, those areas were selected that are particularly relevant to preaching. They include the Word of God as: Christ, law and gospel, Scripture, the Church and the ministry. Although these chapters are essentially theological in nature, the materials included and the way they were presented were often selected and viewed in relation to their relevance to preaching.

Although the message is the very heart and center of the sermon, there is the preacher and his preaching

style that must be considered. Chapter Six of this paper centers on Luther as a person, a preacher and on one of his sermons. By using the tools of contemporary speech criticism it is here where we can start to see what makes some preachers great preachers and some sermons great sermons. Here we see that a preacher and a sermon are not simply an isolated event, but both have a past, a present and a future which are extremely relevant to the preaching event itself.

Chapter Seven seeks to answer a practical question, What is the primary relevance of Luther's theology and preaching to preaching today? In a sense, the answer to this question is implicit throughout the entire paper. However, this last chapter focuses on the most important themes and areas of relevance.

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CHAPTER I

THE WORD OF GOD AS CHRIST

Word and Christ Related

For Luther, "the Word" and "Christ" are virtually identical and interchangeable. Christ is the Word incarnate; the Word is Christ incarnate. These two expressions are so bound together in Luther's thought, it is difficult to say that one is prior to or based on the other. On the one hand, it can be said that his understanding of the Word is based on his understanding of the incarnate Christ. On the other hand, it can be said that his understanding of Christ is based on the incarnate Word, the Scriptures. Luther used these terms together and synonymously and did not try to separate them for purposes of analysis or clarifying their intimate relationship. He would simply say, "The Word is the gospel of God concerning His Son."¹ or "Christ . . . offers His grace to all men in the Word."² or "One thing, and only one thing is necessary

¹Martin Luther, "Freedom of a Christian, 1520," in Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings (Garden City: Doubleday, 1961), p. 55.

²The Book of Concord (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 532.

for the Christian life, righteousness and freedom. That one thing is the most holy Word of God, the gospel of Christ."³

The Word and Christ have their basic unity in God the Father. Both are true expressions of the heart, mind, and will of God. He says of Christ, "There is no other God apart from this Christ who has become our light and sun . . . He and no one else is the true God."⁴ "We could never come to recognize the Father's favor and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the Father's heart."⁵ He says of the Word,

³Luther, op. cit., p. 54. . . . Let us then consider it certain and firmly established that the soul can do without anything except the Word of God and that where the Word of God is missing there is no help for the soul. If it has the Word of God it is rich and lacks nothing since it is the Word of life, truth, light, peace, righteousness, salvation, joy, liberty, wisdom, power, grace, glory, and of every incalculable blessing On the other hand, there is no more terrible disaster with which the wrath of God can afflict men than a famine of the hearing of his Word Now was Christ sent into the world for any other ministry except that of the Word. Moreover, the entire spiritual estate--all the apostles, bishops, and priests--has been called and instituted only for the ministry of the Word.

⁴Paul Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 191.

⁵The Book of Concord, p. 419.

If you want to obtain grace, take care that you listen attentively to the Word of God or recall it with diligence. The Word, I say, and the Word only, is the vehicle of the grace of God.⁶

At this point, there is a slight difference. While Christ and the Word both express the heart, mind and will of God, Luther makes a one to one comparison between Christ and God; whereas, he uses the Word as the vehicle of God's expression incarnate in a multitude of forms, one of which is Jesus Christ. Luther himself makes the distinction this way: "The Word is effectively God, not substantially. It is the power and the might of God, for it is characteristic of the man Christ."⁷ Thus, for Luther, it is the Word that is incarnate in Christ, but it is Christ who reveals the true God and in turn, the true Word.

Proper Knowledge of God

This relationship may be seen in Luther's understanding of the means by which we receive the proper knowledge of God. He is emphatic that, "It is impossible ever to decide what God wills and what is pleasing to Him, except in His Word."⁸ The monks, the Turks and the

⁶Regin Prenter, "The Living Word," in More About Luther (Decorah: Luther College Press, 1958), p. 65.

⁷Ewald M. Plass (ed.) What Luther Says (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), III, 1464.

⁸Martin Luther, "Lectures on Galatians, 1535," in His Works (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), XXVI, 388.

enthusiasts he accuses of distorting the Word by surrendering their knowledge of Christ so that they could follow the imaginations of their own hearts.⁹ These imaginations are a result of the natural knowledge that all men have of God.¹⁰ From this, Luther concludes, "Because men have this natural knowledge about God, they conceived vain and wicked thoughts about God apart from and contrary to the Word" ¹¹ Therefore, he explains that the true Word which shows us God as He is and how we should properly regard Him is revealed to us, not in nature, but in Christ. It is Christ who substantially represents God and shows us the nature of the Word and keeps it from distortion.

Luther came to this conclusion about the proper knowledge of God through his study of the written Word. As a biblical expositor, he developed a twofold understanding of the knowledge of God, the general and the particular. Through creation and the religious inclinations of the human heart, all men have a general knowledge of God. We know that God is, that He created the heavens and the earth, and that He is just and punishes the wicked.

⁹Ibid., p. 396.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 400.

¹¹Ibid.

However, we do not know what God thinks of us or that He wants to save us from sin and death. He says this general knowledge is similar to only knowing a man by sight but not knowing what his will is toward us. And, when we only have a general knowledge, we can only imagine what his will is toward us. This imagination is a projection of our own hearts and not based on facts. Applied to God, Luther calls this idolatry because we worship God as we imagine Him to be and not as He actually is.

The particular knowledge of God is revealed in Jesus Christ. In the person, activity and history of Jesus Christ, God has opened His heart to us and gives us the certainty about how He feels toward us and what He intends to do with us.¹² This is the true knowledge of God, it is the Word which has its precise meaning expressed in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Therefore, Luther concludes, "Whoever wants to worship God or serve Him without the Word is serving not the true God but, as Paul says, 'one who by nature is no god.'"¹³ And, "Apart from Christ there is nothing but sheer idolatry, an idol and a false fiction about God."¹⁴

¹²Ibid., p. 399.

¹³Ibid., p. 400.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 401.

Word, Christ and Scripture

The Word and Christ also come together in Luther's understanding of the Holy Scriptures. While the term "Word of God" has many associations, it has its most immediate association with the Scriptures where the Word is expressed in the form of written words. However, when Luther identifies the Word as Scripture, he does not mean something different or apart from Christ. Rather, he asserts, "All Scripture everywhere deals only with Christ."¹⁵ "There is no doubt that all the Scriptures points to Christ alone."¹⁶ Althaus concludes, "Christ is the incarnate Word of God. Therefore the Bible can be the Word of God only if its sole content is Christ."¹⁷

Pelikan summarizes the relationship between the Word of God and Christ in the testaments in this way:

In short, as the Word of God in the cosmic sense was the eternal Christ, and as the Word of God in the Old Testament was finally the anticipated Christ, so the Word of God in the New Testament was essentially the historical Christ."¹⁸

¹⁵Althaus, op. cit., p. 74.

¹⁶Martin Luther, "Avoiding the Doctrines of Men, 1522," in His Works, XXXV, 133.

¹⁷Althaus, op. cit., p. 74.

¹⁸Jaroslav Pelikan, Luther the Expositor (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), p. 60.

The Old Testament is the Word of God because it is a record of the deeds in which God chose to act redemptively. And, because it is a record of God's redemptive Word, God Himself speaking, it is Christ.

The Word of God and Christ come together in the testaments as the redemptive deed of God. For Luther, the Word of God was a special redemptive deed, but the deed through which the Word was spoken most clearly was the crucifixion and resurrection. As the whole of Scripture is divided between the law and the gospel, so these are the works of Christ. While Luther found Christ and His works of judgment and grace in both testaments, he would also sometimes generalize and treat the Old Testament as essentially law and the New Testament as essentially gospel.¹⁹

The Old Testament, the judgment work of Christ is necessary because as knowledgeable and proud men, intent on saving ourselves and rebellious against God, it is only when our proud spirits are broken by the letter of the law, which stands as a condemning judgment upon our lives, that we will receive Christ, the graciousness of God toward us. In this way, Christ stands at the very heart of the Old Testament fulfilling His alien work as Judge so that He might later stand at the heart of the New Testament.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 53-63.

fulfilling His proper work as Savior. Again, here is this interchangeable relationship between Christ and the Word. The Old Testament is something essentially written--laws; and yet it is the alien work of Christ. The New Testament is essentially to be proclaimed in spoken words, and yet is the proper work of Christ. Thus, while the two testaments are words, written and spoken, they are essentially Christ. As the Jesus of history was Christ veiled in human flesh, so the Scriptures are Christ veiled in written words.

Word and Christ Perform the Same Work

The Word of God and Christ are also similar in that they perform the same work of God.

The Word never departs without fruit. It always awakens new understanding, new pleasure, and a new spirit of devotion . . . [it] is not idle or dead but is effective and living.²⁰

Of Christ, he writes,

Christ is not only a perfect creature but true God, who performs the very same works that the Father performs. He performs divine works, not those of a creature but of a Creator.²¹

Therefore, as incarnate expressions of God, both the Word and Christ perform and accomplish the work of God, namely, creation and salvation.

²⁰The Book of Concord, p. 379.

²¹Luther, "Lectures on Galatians, 1535," in His Works, XXVI, 32.

The Word and Christ are co-creators with God. They are one in the Godhead as the eternal Logos or the pre-existent Christ.²² As the eternal Logos, " . . . the Word of God in the sense was the Second Person of the Trinity."²³ Prenter points out that Luther connects the Word, Logos, and the Son with Genesis 1:3, where the Word is God's creative Word.²⁴ However, without separating the Word and Christ, in creation the Word performs the dominant role. He says, "Everything was created and is preserved through the Word."²⁵ "God calls into existence the things

²²Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis, 1535," in His Works, I, 17.

²³Pelikan, op. cit., p. 52-53. Because Luther's theology was a theology of the Word of God, it is also a Trinitarian theology: the "Word of God" in the cosmic sense was the Second Person of the Trinity. There is in Luther's writings very little speculation about the inner life of the Holy Trinity, which had been a favorite subject among theologians. He had surprisingly little to say even about Christ as the Second Person of the Trinity apart from Jesus Christ in the flesh. Yet when the Biblical text seemed to require it, as in the prolog to St. John, Luther did discuss the Trinity and the pre-existent Christ. But because the central emphasis of these discussions was the Word of God, Luther used them to delineate the congruence between God as He is and God as He speaks. From the Word of God in Jesus Christ one could know the Word of God as the Second Person of the Trinity, but not *vica versa*. Luther's doctrine of the Trinity was centered in Christ, but his doctrine of Christ was centered in the Word of God spoken through Christ by the Father. On this ground he maintained that the Word of God, the Logos, was indeed eternal, both before creation and before redemption.

²⁴Regin Prenter, Spiritus Creator (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1953), p. 175.

²⁵Martin Luther, "Psalm 90, 1534," in His Works, XIII, 99.

that do not exist. God's command or speech is equivalent to creation."²⁶ But, it was only when God spoke His Word in Christ that the Word He spoke in creation became known.²⁷ Of this intimate relationship, Pelikan writes,

One of the primary functions served by Luther's doctrine of Christ as the Logos-Word of God was to prevent either an identification or a separation of the creating Word and the redeeming Word. The Word of God in creation could not be simply identified with the Word of God in redemption, because the redeeming of God was to prevent either an identification or a separation of the creating Word and the redeeming Word. The Word of God in creation could not be simply identified with the Word of God in redemption, because the redeeming Word was the historical figure of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. But they could not be separated either, as though creation were beneath the dignity of the God who redeemed men through the Word that was in Christ, for the cosmic Word of God had become flesh in Jesus of Nazareth.²⁸

Creation and redemption are closely related in Luther's thought. And, although he views creation as a cosmic event and redemption an historical event, they both presuppose and depend on the other. Creation presupposes redemption and redemption presupposes a creation.

While the Word plays the dominant role in creation, so Christ plays the dominant role in redemption. But, again, Christ and the Word cannot be separated. In redemption, it is the Word which Christ speaks which issues

²⁶Althaus, op. cit., p. 109.

²⁷Pelikan, op. cit., p. 52.

²⁸Ibid., p. 53.

forth in faith and redemption. When the heart takes hold of Christ through the Word, it becomes a new creation.²⁹ Thus, even in the event of redemption, is creation. The Word of God and Christ, pre-existent with God, form in the creative and redemptive events an unending dialogue from the beginning to the present. For Luther, God was not a carpenter who would produce something and then go off and leave it. Rather, God was a God of action continually involved in the world.³⁰

The Word and Christ perform the same work in that they break the tyrants: the law, the devil, death, hell and all evils. Luther has no illusions about the goodness of the human heart. If anything, he was preoccupied with the problem of sin and the complete and total deprivation of the soul. Man is damned, he lives in bondage to powers beyond his control. For Luther, these powers were intensely concrete and personal. The law condemns us because we do not and in fact, can not fulfill its radical demand. Death is a stark reality, it happens everyday. Insofar as we view these apart from the gospel, they are tyrants. We have no control over them and they work against us to bring us to nothing. The law judges our life as evil and death brings it to an end. There is no way we

²⁹Luther, "Lectures on Galatians, 1535," XXVI, 392.

³⁰Ibid., p. 31.

can save ourselves or change the situation, we are the judged, the victims. Luther asserts that the devil does everything in his power to keep it this way. " . . . he tries to mar the image of Christ and snatch the Word from our hearts."³¹ The devil tells us Christ is a cruel master and a judge who convicts us of our sins. He tells us of the wrath of God and tries to terrify us so by the fear of Christ and eternal judgment. We remain in his bondage.

However, this is what the gospel is all about. It announces a victory over these tyrants. Luther says, " . . . the bare Word sends Christ forth as the Victor over sin, death and every evil."³²

The Word and Christ are powerful acts of God that both break and supercede the tyrants. Luther writes,

The devil cannot bear to hear God's Word. God's Word is not like some empty tale . . . but as St. Paul says in Romans 1:16, it is the 'power of God,' indeed, the power of God which burns the devil and gives us immeasurable strength, comfort, and help.³³

Of Christ, he writes, "His victory is a victory over the Law, sin, our flesh, the world, the devil, death, hell, and

³¹Ibid., p. 38.

³²Ibid., p. 380.

³³The Book of Concord, p. 360.

all evils; and this victory He has given to us."³⁴

Similar quotes can be found frequently throughout Luther's works. Watson indicates how basic this is to Luther when he comments on Luther's behalf,

The New Testament [the Word] primarily sets forth the gospel, which is nothing else but 'good tidings' of how Christ had conquered the Tyrants and broken their power over those they held captive It is the joyful news of the victory won.³⁵

However, while Luther can and does use these words interchangeably as conquerors of the tyrants, he does make some subtle distinctions between the two. First, he sets in contrast the Word and the devil as effective powers. Although you know the Word perfectly, you are still daily under the dominion of the devil, and therefore must continually keep the Word in your heart. To fight off the devil, we must be armed with the Word of God, and, when the Word of God appears, the devil becomes angry.³⁶ Here, Christ differs from the Word slightly in that Christ is not so much set against the devil as a spiritual power, but rather, the one who has done battle with the devil and defeated him. This is the same distinction which runs throughout Luther's thought, namely, the distinction

³⁴Luther, "Lectures on Galatians, 1535," XXVI, 22.

³⁵Phillip Watson, Let God Be God (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 150.

³⁶The Book of Concord, p. 100.

between the Word of God and the forms in which this Word becomes incarnate. This distinction is very important because it both upholds the true God beyond the corruption of human concepts while at the same time, puts God actively in the midst of where the action is in history. Pelikan puts it clearly and briefly when he writes,

The deed through which the Word of God in Christ was spoken most clearly was the crucifixion and resurrection . . . Christ was not primarily an Example for men to imitate through their moral obedience, but the Exemplar in whom God had manifested His work and His Word. It is not what Christ did that believers must do, but what was done to Christ is what believers must learn to recognize as being done to them as well.³⁷

Content of Faith

The Word and Christ also came together with similar, if not identical meanings in relation to faith. For Luther, faith itself is a gift from God. "Faith alone is the saving and efficacious use of the Word of God."³⁸ The effect of faith is that man abandons all self trust and gratefully places his life into the hands of God. The content of faith is Christ, the Word of God. Christ is the content of faith in that in Him, we see precisely what God has done in ourselves, namely, suffering and redemption, or

³⁷Pelikan, op. cit., p. 62.

³⁸Luther, "Freedom of a Christian, 1520," p. 55.

the cross and resurrection. In the same way, the Word consists of the law and the gospel. Faith moves from the law to the gospel and this is irreversible.³⁹ This involves a process of becoming. The result is a new creation. This new creation is the result of the same agents of creation; Christ and the Word. But now it has happened to us and in us and has the validation of personal experience.⁴⁰ Because it has happened at the very heart of our existence, Luther asserts that we, in fact, feel a union with Christ and the Word. In faith, Christ lives in the heart and the believer becomes one with Christ. In the same way, when the soul is united with the Word, it becomes like the Word, just as iron becomes red like the fire in which it is heated.⁴¹

³⁹Althaus, op. cit., p. 265.

⁴⁰Luther, "Lectures on Genesis, 1535," I, 17.

⁴¹Althaus, op. cit., p. 232.

CHAPTER II

THE WORD OF GOD AS LAW AND GOSPEL

The Word of God incarnate in Christ and contained in the Scriptures confronts men as law and gospel. These Luther calls the alien and proper works of God. He writes:

The way the Word of God proceeds is, it hammers the great and mighty mountains with its thunder and lightening and storms so that they smoke. It shatters everything that is great and proud and disobedient But, on the other hand, it is also like a fruitful rain, sprinkling and moistening, planting and strengthening whatever is like the poor parched plants that are now weak and sickly.¹

In Christ, the alien work of God is Christ's judgment and crucifixion, His proper work is Christ's forgiveness and resurrection. He goes on to say that these are the two works God must do in us, namely, the judgment and destruction of the old self and the forgiveness and creation of the new.

In the Scriptures, the alien and proper works of God are called law and gospel. "The divine Scriptures deal with our sin in two ways: in one way through the law of God, and in the other way through God's gospel."² In a sense, Luther views the whole of Scripture as either law or

¹Martin Luther, "The Sermon on the Mount, 1530," in His Works (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), XXI, 120.

²Martin Luther, "Against Latomus, 1521," in His Works XXI, 223.

gospel. "We must understand that the entire Holy Scripture is divided into two kinds of words: the commandments or laws of God, and His promise or pledge."³

Distinguish Between Law and Gospel

One of Luther's most emphatic notes is that a sharp distinction must be made between the Word of God as law and the Word of God as gospel. He believed the preservation of pure doctrine absolutely depended on the accurate theological statement of the nature and meaning of both. To be able to make this distinction, he says, is the mark of a true theologian.

The reason it is so vitally important to distinguish between the law and gospel is because when they are confused the gospel is subverted and lost. Luther writes: "For when the promise is mixed up with the law, it becomes law pure and simple."⁴ Thus, unless the distinction is carefully made, the law loses its gospel character and is understood only as judgment. The gospel loses its proper meaning and is understood only as demand.

³Martin Luther, "Freedom of a Christian, 1520," in Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings (Garden City: Doubleday, 1961), p. 57.

⁴Martin Luther, "Lectures on Galatians, 1535," in His Works, XXVI, 305.

This confusion must also be avoided in one's relationship with God.

Either Christ must abide, and the law perish; or the law must abide, and Christ perish. It is impossible for Christ and the law to agree and to share reign over the conscience One of them must be rejected and abolished and the other must be confirmed and substantiated.⁵

Luther urged his followers to learn the true and proper use of the law carefully because there were so few who understood it even among the Lutherans. He attacked those who boasted that they were intent on the glory of God, the salvation of men and taught only the pure Word. He said that under the name of Christ they taught their own dreams and under the name of the gospel, taught only laws and ceremonies. A case in point were the Anabaptists who emphasized personal piety and right works as the means of salvation. Luther saw this as actually trusting in one's own works for salvation, thus making law out of the gospel. Luther saw this as locating salvation in the laws and the works of earth instead of in the grace and mercy of God.

One way to distinguish between the law and the gospel is by function. The law reveals sin and wrath; the gospel offers faith and grace. The law damns and condemns without condition; the gospel frees and justifies without condition. The law gives rules to live by and lays

⁵Ibid., p. 54.

shackles upon the shoulder; the gospel offers forgiveness and freedom. The law accuses and terrifies, the gospel illumines the heart and makes it alive. The law says what we must do; the gospel says what God has done and is doing.

Another way to distinguish is to locate the gospel in heaven and the law on earth. If the issue involves faith, grace or heavenly righteousness it should be understood in the light of the gospel. If, on the other hand, the issue deals with works or earthly righteousness, it should be considered in the light of the law.⁶

Law and Gospel Related

Although Luther insisted on a careful and precise distinction between the law and gospel, he also recognized a very intimate relationship between them. "The law and gospel neither can nor should be separated . . . for they are closely bound together and involved in each other."⁷

Their relationship has its basic foundation and unity in the Word of God. Together they reflect the innermost heart and will of God. Together they do the work of God. Together they are the expression of one will and

⁶Ibid., p. 115.

⁷Paul Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 257.

serve the one purpose of salvation. And, together they must be proclaimed.

They are not separable parts but belong together just as in the person of Christ the divine and human natures belong together without confusion, without change, without division, and without separation.⁸

The law and gospel are related in that they can be companions or complementary opposites. As companions the law and gospel teach the love of God and love of fellow man. As complementary opposites the law and gospel presuppose one another and need each other for their own proper fulfillment. The gospel proclaims forgiveness which presupposes sin and the desire for forgiveness. This in turn presupposes the law which reveals sin. "If it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin." (Romans 7:7) On the other hand, the law, by revealing sin, presupposes the forgiveness of the gospel, for without forgiveness there would be no point in revealing sin.

Proper Work of the Law

Watson points out that to understand Luther's theology of the law and the gospel, "It is of vital importance that the law should be understood in light of

⁸Herman Sasse, "Luther and the Word of God," in Accents in Luther's Theology (St. Louis: Concordia, 1967), p. 63.

the gospel and not the gospel in light of the law."⁹ The gospel not only is the basis of the law in terms of the historical God-man relationship, but goes even deeper and is basic to creation itself. In creation the Word of God was written on the hearts of men. Luther calls this Word the living law. It is the law of love, to love God supremely and to love our neighbors as ourselves. It antedates Moses and is the content of the Decalogue. Luther asserts, "The whole law handed down to us is . . . nothing else than this natural law which everyone knows and on account of which no one is without excuse."¹⁰

But this law written on the hearts of men, which could have been a light, has been darkened since the Fall by man's sinful desires. Therefore, God was compelled to give a written law to remind men of the natural law in their hearts. In this sense, Moses is not really the author of the Decalogue but identifies, clarifies and interprets the natural laws written on the hearts of men. Like Moses, Christ is not a giver of the law, but an interpreter of the law. Luther conceives of the proper

⁹Phillip Watson, Let God Be God (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 153.

¹⁰Martin Luther, Lectures on Romans, 1515-1516 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), p. 46.

work of the law as having two different functions, civil and spiritual.

The civil law is to prohibit gross transgressions and crimes in this world. "In society, obedience to the law must be strictly required."¹¹ However, Watson points out that even in regard to the civil use of the law, Luther is not thinking in terms of a fixed, statutory code of laws. Rather, even here the Law is essentially the will of God as it is expressed in a whole series of offices and stations, namely, the fulfilling of one's natural position in society as the vocation of a parent, citizen, worker, etc. Written, enacted laws are necessary for this world because the offices are liable to abuse. Civil laws vary with time, place and circumstance, and possess no claim to validity except as they are in harmony with the law that is both natural and divine. For Luther, the law is always something much wider and more fundamental than mere legislation. It is woven into the very fabric of human life, into the texture of the universe itself so that no one can be ignorant of it or ignore it. Although it cannot make men good so that they freely and willingly do what it requires, it does control their behavior and prevents them from giving free reign to contrary impulses. As Luther puts it, the function of the civil law is to

¹¹Luther, "Lectures on Galatians, 1535," XXVI, 224.

. . . bridle the flesh, punish transgressions, and restrain sin. Insofar as it does this it is a great blessing to mankind, one of the best gifts of God that the world has.¹²

Regarding the fulfillment of one's vocation of function and office as part of the civil law, Luther says:

. . . if you live according to God's Word and command in your station with your husband, wife, child, neighbor, or friend, you can see God's intention in these things; and you can come to the conclusion that they please Him, since this is not your own dream, but His Word and command which never deludes or deceives us.¹³

One of Luther's favorite illustrations relating to the Word of God and civil law is on marriage.

When a man does not look at his wife, on the basis of the Word of God, as the one whom God gives him and whom He blesses, and when instead he turns his gaze to another woman, this is the principle cause of adultery, which then is almost inevitable.¹⁴

On the other hand, nothing but good fruit can come from the station that God has created and ordained, and from the man who works and lives in this station on the basis of the Word of God.

Regarding the civil law as the performing of proper functions, Luther's use of the Word of God has two meanings. First, God's Word is God's ordination or establishment of

¹²Watson, op. cit., p. 155.

¹³Luther, "The Sermon on the Mount, 1530," XXI, 35-37.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 87.

the functions as worthy and wholesome for man. Second, it is understood in terms of faith. By faith, a man accepts his office as given to him by God. It is to be performed in accordance to his relationship with God as Lord.

The second purpose of the law is spiritual. The spiritual purpose of the law is to bring man to the full awareness of his condition as sinner. This work of the law is a prior necessity to the experiences of faith, because men will not listen to the gospel until they have been made aware of their sin. Luther's favorite analogy is to describe the law as a mirror which reflects back to a person an image of his corrupt inner nature. He frequently quoted Paul, "If it were not for the law, I would not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.'" (Romans 7:7)

The spiritual use of the law reveals a twofold evil, the inward and the outward. The first, which we inflict on ourselves, is sin and the corruption of nature; the second, which God inflicts, is wrath, death and being accursed. The first evil is the trust we put in our own virtues, feeling in our hearts that we have fulfilled the law. Luther tells us:

. . . it is only the law which shows that our virtues--arts, talents, prudence, courage, and chastity are evil--not, to be sure, in and of themselves, for they are the gifts of God, but because of that deeply hidden root of sin which is the cause of our being

pleased with, relying, and glorying in these things which are not felt to be evil.¹⁵

This sin of corruption of nature Luther describes as a radical ferment which bears fruit in evil deeds and words. It is the law which exposes this hidden sin. He writes:

Sin . . . can never remain hidden so that it does not produce its fruits (which are of different sorts in different people, for you are not able to indicate any single evil work to which you can consign all men, for there are many).¹⁶

The law goes even further. It not only reveals sin but increases it. The law makes impossible demands. The more a person strives to fulfill the law's demands, the more keenly he becomes aware of his own sin and his inability to keep the law. His good works provide no satisfaction and his resentment and hatred toward God increase which in turn is the greatest sin of all. This circular process leads into an ever deepening consciousness of sin and judgment until Luther can describe the law as an instrument that kills.

Secondly, Luther says the law brings wrath. Wrath is inflicted by God. It is the experience of being accursed and the terrible anxiety of knowing oneself as condemned. It is the instrument God uses to drive a person

¹⁵Luther, "Against Latomus, 1521," XXI, 226.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 224.

to despair. Luther believed, perhaps largely because of his own experience but also for scriptural reasons, that a person can experience God's grace only after having experienced His wrath.

Strange Work of the Gospel

Just as the work of the law is twofold, namely, proper and alien, so also the work of the gospel is twofold. The alien or strange work of the gospel has essentially the same task as the proper work of the law, i.e., to reveal sin and bring wrath. However, the strange work of the gospel reveals sin even more profoundly than does the law. Luther says the task of the strange work of the gospel

. . . is to prepare a people perfect for the Lord, that is, to make manifest sins and pronounce guilty those who were righteous in their own eyes by declaring that all men are sinners and devoid of the grace by God.¹⁷

He goes on to point out that this is the worst kind of message and could be called "bad news."

The primary task of the strange work of the gospel is to reveal the sin of the proud and secure who consider themselves righteous by the law and are not conscious of any sin. It is directed at those who think they have

¹⁷Martin Luther, "Sermons, 1510-1546," in His Works, LI, 20.

fulfilled the law by not killing, stealing or committing adultery. To those who consider themselves righteous, the gospel interprets the law and says repent, for all have sinned. The gospel declares all men sinners and thus sounds exceedingly harsh in its alien tones.

Luther affirms:

It was Christ and Paul who taught us how to show that these too are sinners, namely, by showing that they do not fulfill the law in spirit, that in all events they sin and have evil desires in their hearts. And even though they do not kill anyone, they are never the less angry. They may not steal, but they are avaricious. They may not commit adultery, but they have evil desires Therefore the gospel magnifies sin in that it so broadens the law that no man can be found just, that there is none who does not transgress the law.¹⁸

Jesus, as example, is the sharpest demand of the gospel. In addition to His example, Jesus interpreted the law and radically sharpened its demand to include a pure heart, perfect obedience and perfect fear and love of God. He spoke to the spirit of the law by saying, " . . . you shall not judge, you shall not envy, you shall not lust."¹⁹ This radical interpretation leaves no one secure in himself and forces all to despair of their own righteousness.

A second way in which the strange work of the gospel convicts of sin is in its offering the grace and benefits of Christ.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁹Regin Prenter, "The Living Word," in More About Luther (Decorah: Luther College Press, 1958), p. 69.

Because the law always insists, 'pay what you owe' and the gospel says, 'your sins are forgiven,' the gospel reveals sin more profoundly than the law.²⁰

Luther was convinced that nothing could convict of sin with such penetration as the kindness of God, that no law can strike so deeply and so into our heart and cause such fearful pain as the vision of God's goodness in the gospel. Thus, in brief, the strange work of the gospel interprets the spirit of the law and sets forth its radical implications.

The Proper Work of the Gospel

The Word of God in Luther's theology finds its fullest and most authentic expression in the proper work of the gospel. While in a larger sense, the gospel can and does include the total Christian message; in a narrower sense, it is the apex. It stands by itself as the true Word of God. It is the message God is seeking to communicate; it is the true expression of His heart, mind, and will. It is that which stands above all other words, it is the final Word. The Gospel is what God is seeking to speak to us in Christ and in the Scriptures. It is, in a sense, the point. It is the ultimate message of both Christ and the Scriptures.

²⁰Gordon Rupp, The Righteousness of God (New York: Philosophical Library, 1953), p. 196.

The experience and understanding of the gospel's message stands as the dividing line between the young Luther and the mature Luther. It stands as the dividing line between Luther as a man of doubt, anguish and fear and Luther as a man of faith, peace and confidence in God. Historically, this dividing line most likely came toward the end of the year 1518. Luther relates it to his struggle with Paul's phrase: (Romans 1:17b) "He who through faith is righteous shall live."²¹

As a careful and diligent monk with a deep passion for salvation, Luther for years interpreted righteous to mean those acts of men which make him right before God. However, he was keenly aware of his sin, especially that inner sin of hating God while pretending to be His servant. Finally, Luther realized Paul was talking about God's righteousness, not man's righteousness; that God, through His acts in Christ, regards men as righteous even while they remain sinners; that men can in no way make themselves righteous before God, but are simply treated as such by God. This discovery freed Luther from his obsessions with his sin. The agony of years was gone. The burden of self justification was released. At last he had experienced the Word of God as gospel.

²¹Hartman Grisar, Luther (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1913) I, 390.

Uuras Saarnivaara describes Luther's experience this way.

The crucial point in the discovery of Luther was the doctrine of the imputation of righteousness As a result of this discovery Luther was overjoyed to the point he felt he had entered Paradise. Now he realized that it was unnecessary for him to look to his renewal and his progress in holiness for his justification before God. He could rest with confidence on the finished work and righteousness of Christ.²²

In stating his understanding of the gospel, Luther makes this statement.

The proper definition of the gospel is that it is the promise of Christ, which frees us from the terrors of the law, sin, and death, and brings grace, forgiveness of sins, righteousness, and eternal life.²³

He also turns to the Greek word for gospel and says it means: a good message, good tidings, good news, a good report which one sings and tells with rejoicing. An illustration he uses of this is when David overcame the great Goliath and there came among the Jewish people the good report and encouraging news that their terrible enemy had been smitten. This news gave way to joy and peace, singing and dancing.

Luther uses the gospel and the Word of God synonymously. One of his primary passions as a reformer

²²Uuras Saarnivaara, Luther Discovers the Gospel (St. Louis: Concordia, 1951), p. 43.

²³Althaus, op. cit., p. 256fn.

was that the gospel must be maintained and respected as the Word of God. He pointed out the reason Paul so frequently stated that he did not learn his gospel from men was so that he could convince his hearers that the gospel was the true Word of God and discourage belief in what some of the false apostles were saying. In his own controversies, Luther frequently defined the issue as the Word of God and the truth of the gospel and insisted they must be preserved at all costs. He wrote,

It makes no difference to me how great Peter and the other apostles have been or how many miracles they have performed. What I am contending for is that the truth of the gospel must be preserved among you.²⁴

The proper work of the gospel is salvation. Luther points out frequently that the law is good, it is a light guiding the way, but it cannot save. It is the gospel that has the power to save. "The gospel deals with sin so as to remove it and thus most beautifully follows the law"25

The gospel teaches two things: the righteousness and the grace of God. These two works of the gospel deal with the twofold evil revealed by the law: the corruption of nature and wrath.²⁶

²⁴Luther, "Lectures on Galatians, 1535," XXVI, 227.

²⁵Luther, "Against Latomus, 1521," XXI, 226.

²⁶Ibid., p. 224.

"The righteousness of God supercedes the corruption of nature by giving the gift of faith. Faith is man's response when he accepts this righteousness of God."²⁷

However, until a man does and can respond in faith he lives under the other evil revealed by the law. This evil is wrath. While corruption of nature is an inward evil, wrath is an outward evil and confronts men as death and being accursed. It causes fear and suffering under its blight. This wrath is healed by the gospel of grace. Grace is the good will or favor or mercy of God.

This grace truly produces peace of heart until finally a man is healed from his corruption and feels he has a gracious God. It is this which gives joy, security, and fearlessness to the conscience so that one dares all, can do all and in this trust in the grace of God, laughs even at death.²⁸

²⁷Luther, "Lectures on Galatians, 1535," XXVI, 113.

²⁸Luther, "Against Latomus, 1521," XXI, 227.

CHAPTER III

THE WORD OF GOD AS SCRIPTURE

For all practical purposes, Luther spoke of and treated the Scriptures as the Word of God. His use and understanding of the Word of God has, as its most immediate identification, the Scriptures--the Word incarnate in written words. He wrote, "Holy Scripture is God's Word written and, so to speak, lettered and fashioned in the form of letters, as Christ the eternal Word is clothed in our humanity."¹ "No one letter in Scripture is without purpose, for Scripture is God's writing and God's Word."² The Scriptures are both a storehouse of God's Word and a vehicle which God uses to transport His Word from the past into the present and future.

The languages (Greek and Hebrew) are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit is contained; they are the casket in which this jewel is enshrined; they are the vessel in which this wine is held; they are larder in which this food is stored.³

As an expositor of the Old Testament and a Hebrew linguist, Luther knew that in the Hebrew mind the terms for

¹Douglas Carter, "Luther as Exegete," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXXII (September 1961), 520.

²Ibid.

³Curtis Huber, "Meaning of the Word in Lutheran Orthodoxy," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXXVI (September 1965), 561.

"word" referred not only to the spoken or written word, but also to what the spoken or written word referred.⁴ He understood the term "Word" to mean the historical action of God. Events in human history were all Words of God, because, in the mystery of divine providence, each of them was a deed of God.⁵ Luther said, "God's works are words . . . His doing is identical with His speaking."⁶ In essence, God's Word becomes incarnate in concrete events. Through the eyes of faith, men have perceived in these events the activity of the incarnate Word. They translated this activity into words which were first proclaimed orally and then later written to preserve them from the distortions of men's minds. Thus the Scriptures are a recording of God's creating and redeeming activity, but, when recalled and proclaimed the Word has power of creating and redeeming anew.

To qualify as the Word of God, a concrete event had to be special. Such events were made special by God choosing them by His free and sovereign will.⁷ When God

⁴Carter, op. cit., p. 520.

⁵Jaroslav Pelikan, Luther the Expositor (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), p. 54.

⁶Wilhelm Pauck, "Introduction" in Martin Luther, Lectures on Romans, 1515-1516 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), p. xxxiii.

⁷Pelikan, op. cit., p. 54.

chose these special deeds to reveal His Word, it was for the twofold purpose of redemption and revelation. A Word of God was a deed through which God chose to act redemptively and thus reveal His very nature. However, while the Word of God was a deed, it also remains a Word which reveals God as Lord and Savior.

Authority of Scripture

Scripture became Luther's major source of authority. It was for him the vessel of God's Word and the vehicle which transports God's Word into the present. Although he came to regard Scripture as his ultimate authority, he was not a literalist weighing each word equally. Rather, through his study of Scripture he came to understand Christ and/or the gospel as the central thrust of Scripture. He realized that God's Word is God's message and that the ultimate authority from which even Christ and the Scriptures receive their authority is God. Thus, for Luther, the ultimate authority is God but what we know of God is found in the Word as Christ and Scripture.

All of Luther's theological thinking presupposes the authority of Scripture. He wrote, "But by the grace of God our doctrine is pure; we have all the articles of

faith solidly established in Sacred Scripture."⁸ Almost every step in his theology receives its basis and direction from Scripture. As an exegete and preacher, his thinking was in constant conversation with Scripture. He was not a systematic theologian. Rather, his theology is his exegesis and interpretation of Scripture.

Luther emphasized that:

We must make a great difference between God's Word and the word of man. A man's word is a little sound that flies into the air, and soon vanishes; but the Word of God is greater than heaven and earth, yea, greater than death and hell, for it forms part of the power of God, and endures everlastingly; we should therefore, diligently study God's Word, and know and assuredly believe that God himself speaks to us.⁹

He was convinced that at times the Fathers had erred and that they should only be believed when they prove their opinions from Scripture.¹⁰ He found support for this conviction in Augustine's conviction that reliance should not be placed in the fathers, bishops, councils or on himself, but rather in Holy Scripture.¹¹ In spiritual matters, Luther made it clear that trust should not be

⁸Martin Luther, "Lectures on Galatians, 1535," in His Works (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964), XXVII, 42.

⁹Hugh T. Kerr (ed.) A Compend of Luther's Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), p. 10.

¹⁰Paul Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 6.

¹¹Martin Luther, "On the Councils and the Church, 1539," in His Works, XXXXI, 27.

placed in human wisdom and reasoning, and that the results of these are error, lies and sin. Luther attacked the idea of an infallible pope and ridiculed monks for imagining they will be saved on the basis of their strict observances and not by Christ. He said they think about God, about Christ, and about divine things, not on the basis of the Word of God but on the basis of their own reason.¹²

Thus developed the idea of sola scriptura in Luther's thought. He believed Scripture is the record of the apostolic witness to Christ and as such is the decisive authority for the church. "No authority after Christ is to be called the foundation of the church."¹³ Luther's sola scriptura implies the divine authority, efficacy, perfection, sufficiency, and perspicuity of Holy Scriptures; but above all Christ is the center. For Luther there is no sola scriptura without solus Christus.¹⁴

The External Word is Valid

Luther held in high regard the Scriptures as the external Word of God. He wrote, "The outward Word is the only means which God uses when he writes his own living

¹²Luther, "Lectures on Galatians, 1535," XXVII, 88.

¹³Althaus, op. cit., p. 5.

¹⁴Lewis W. Spitz, Sr., "Luther's Sola Scriptura," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXXI (December 1960), 742.

Word into the heart."¹⁵ Some thought that God should confer upon individuals His Word by means of a special light and a secret revelation in the heart, apart from the printed and spoken Word. Luther objects and says that no one is to come to a knowledge of Christ without external and general means. "God has deposited this treasure (Christ) in the written and spoken Word and does not intend to confer it privately or secretly."¹⁶ "God does not reveal Himself in the heart except through the external Word. This is why the external Word must be the beginning of your consideration and enlightenment."¹⁷

Luther concludes the written word has a twofold function. The first function is to sustain the oral proclamation of the Word of God. He was convinced the church's decline was because of the low state of preaching and that the low state of preaching was the result of ignorance and irresponsibility toward the Scriptures. This is the reason he translated the Scriptures into German and spent the major part of his theological career as an expositor of the Scriptures. He believed this was necessary because the church could not sustain itself but

¹⁵Regin Prenter, Spiritus Creator (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1953), p. 102.

¹⁶Ewald M. Plass (ed.) What Luther Says (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), III, 4737.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 4738.

must refresh itself from the records of the deeds of God in the written Scriptures.

The second function of the written word is to preserve the proclaimed Word from error. Early distortions made it clear that the church could not rely on the oral word alone to keep its teaching and message pure. It must fix the content of the Word of God by recording it in written form. Ever since, the church has used the written Word of God, the Scriptures, as a weapon against false teachers. However, false teachers have also used the Scriptures as the Word of God. To protect the true content of the Word, Luther used an interpretative principle. He asserted the Scriptures must be interpreted as the deed and proclamation of God as God spoke in the Exodus and in Jesus Christ.

Personal Address

The authority of Scripture to serve as the Word of God is confirmed by personal experience. He wrote of his theology, "I am at least partly informed concerning Holy Writ and besides I have to some extent tested these spiritual matters in experience."¹⁸ This is not to say our experience makes the Scriptures the Word of God, Luther

¹⁸Althaus, op. cit., p. 8.

maintained the Scriptures are the Word of God before we receive them. However, in the relationship which God creates by His Word we are called into fellowship with Him and this fellowship confirms what the Scriptures are saying. In his struggle for his own salvation, Luther became convinced that the Bible contains a living testimony that wants to address every man as a "you." Apart from God's witness, the words of Scripture are simply words, once put into our hearts, they become, the Word of God, "for us."

Surely, a person can preach the Word to me, but no one is able to put into my heart except God alone, who must speak to the heart, or all is vain; for when he is silent, the Word is not spoken. Hence, no one shall draw me from the Word which God teaches me.¹⁹

God addresses His Word to men through the Holy Scriptures, not to provide them with information about Himself or themselves, but to give Himself to them.²⁰ We experience God giving Himself to us when we see that what God has done throughout biblical history and in Jesus Christ, He is doing in us. In this way, the Scriptures are no longer a history or piece of literature, but the living Word of God. Luther said God's Spirit is at work wherever

¹⁹Kerr, op. cit., p. 11.

²⁰Jaroslav Pelikan, From Luther to Kierkegaard (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950), p. 18.

men are able to interpret Scripture and to recognize Christ and wherever great things are done in the church by men.²¹ Brunner, commenting on this type of radical involvement, says it is incorrect to speak of an objective Christian truth which is subjectively apprehended; rather, I, the total I, am apprehended by the living God. Such speaking and thinking bears the marks of existentialism, but it is also the rediscovery of a basic emphasis in Luther's theology.²²

Luther also describes the Scripture as his Holy Anchor and without this Word of God he could not have endured the trials of the flesh.

When the flesh is agitated and raging, the only remedy is that we take "the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God and do battle against it. Then we shall undoubtedly emerge as the victors, even though we may think the exact opposite during the battle. But if we lose sight of the Word, we have no aid or counsel left. I am saying this on the basis of my own personal experience."²³

"Truly, no comfort but that of God's Word is possible to the soul. But where will we find God's Word except in the Scriptures."²⁴

²²Pelikan, From Luther to Kierkegaard, p. 18.

²³Luther, "Lectures on Galatians, 1535," XXVII, 78.

²⁴Kerr, op. cit., p. 10.

Old Testament

It was as an expositor of the Old Testament that Luther came to understand the Scriptural meaning of the term, "Word of God." It was the Old Testament that largely molded his theological understanding of the Word of God which in turn he used to interpret both the Old Testament and the New. In brief, the Word of God in the Old Testament is the redemptive and revelatory deeds of God recorded there.²⁵ As redeemer, the Word of God brings into being a new creation; and as revealer, it gives meaning to that new creation.

Luther reinterpreted the Old Testament and found the redemptive and revelatory deeds of God throughout. Abraham became the father of believers because to be a believer meant to rely on the redemption of which the Word of God testified. David was the prototype of those to whom the Word of God came as judgment in order to come as redemption. The focal point of the Word of God in the Old Testament was the Exodus for this was the high point of God's acts of redemption and revelation. However, even in the Old Testament the Exodus is not the ultimate act, there is another word to be spoken. That Word was to be Christ. Luther frequently equated the Word of God in the Old

²⁵Pelikan, Luther the Expositor, p. 57.

Testament with promise and the ultimate promise was the ultimate redemptive deed in Jesus Christ.²⁶ Of the Old Testament Scriptures he wrote,

Here you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies, and to which the angel points the shephards. Simple and little are the swaddling clothes, but dear is the treasure, Christ, that lies in them.²⁷

New Testament

For Luther, the New Testament is essentially God's Word as gospel. It is the "Good News" of a victory over the powers of destruction, the fulfillment of age long expectation, Christ incarnate in human flesh. It is God speaking His ultimate Word of salvation in the resurrection. This is joyful news insisting on its own immediate proclamation. It is proclaimed by a hearer who has understood and now must share his joy. It is a living Word, present in the now, spoken by a living person. This gospel of the New Testament is not something a person would want to make a law, a written letter. Rather, by its very nature, a person wants to share it personally by telling it directly to another. When remembered and recited in the redemptive community of the church, it becomes an act of

²⁶Ibid., p. 59.

²⁷Martin Luther, "Preface to the Old Testament, 1545," in His Works, XXX, 236.

of redemption "now" because it is the Word made contemporary.²⁸ In this proclaiming and hearing of God's living Word, it again becomes deed, God incarnate; God speaking His Word to our particular historical situation; God confronting us in and through concrete events. For Luther, the New Testament was an active, contemporary, living Word.

However, while Luther uses interchangeably the Word of God and the New Testament, the written New Testament is not so much the Word of God as a written witness which clarifies, keeps pure, and proclaims Christ, the true Word of God. God speaking through His deed in Jesus Christ, translated into written words, became the New Testament and the words and deeds of the New Testament are the vehicles by which God speaks His Word to the present.

Therefore, when Luther refers to the Word of God in the New Testament, he does not merely mean that the writings of the apostles possess a unique authority, although he means that as well. He means primarily that the New Testament speaks the Word of God which had been audible already in the Old Testament, but which could be heard in the New Testament in an ultimate manner and to an ultimate degree. If the Word of God in the Old Testament was a redemptive deed, in the New Testament it was the

²⁸Pelikan, Luther the Expositor, p. 62.

ultimate one. Or, in another way, while the Word of God in the Old Testament was, in the cosmic sense, the eternal Christ, the Word of God in the New Testament was essentially the historical Christ. In this way Luther recognized that the Hebrew way of speaking had influenced the language of the New Testament. He interpreted, via the Old Testament, the Word of God as the concrete action of God and the New Testament as the witness to the ultimate historical act.²⁹

In accordance with his belief that the Old Testament is the Scripture of the Church, he devoted much of his time writing exposition on much of the Old Testament while for the New Testament his expositions were largely sermons in accordance with his understanding that the New Testament was the living Word and was to be preached. With this understanding, Luther changed the basic interpretation of the New Testament from reading it with an eye on the classics to reading it with a firm grounding, understanding and interpretation based on the Old Testament. Frequently he used parallel passages from the Old Testament to clarify passages in the New Testament.

By rooting his interpretation of the New Testament from the perspective and understanding of the Old

²⁹Ibid., p. 60.

Testament, Luther read the New Testament as the early church had apparently intended it, as an addition to the Scriptures which the church already possessed in the Old Testament. Thus, Luther's work as an expositor of the New Testament can be linked with his work as an interpreter of the Old Testament.

Biblical Interpretation

Luther's theological emphasis on the Word of God and his emphasis on the centrality of the Scriptures came together and formed his exegetical principles.³⁰ On the one hand, it was his understanding of the Word of God which formed the point of view he used to interpret Scripture. On the other hand, it was as an expositor of the Scriptures that Luther came to understand the meaning of the Word of God.

As a biblical scholar and expositor of the Old Testament, he came to the realization that for the Hebrew mind, the term "Word" referred not only to what was spoken, but to the concrete action of God. He realized the Word of God was a deed through which God chose to act redemptively. Through these redemptive deeds God revealed His heart and mind which revealed His ultimate Word as a word of grace. It is this understanding of the Word of God as essentially

³⁰Ibid., p. 49.

a word of grace that Luther applied to the whole of Scripture as his basic interpretative principle.

It was by using this kind of circular process that Luther concluded that Scripture interprets itself.³¹

Althaus points out that for Luther the Scripture is grounded in itself and bears witness to itself, and thus precludes the possibility that the standard of its interpretation could come from outside itself.³² Luther believed that this self-interpretation is the most certain, most easy and most clear interpretation.

However, it is only men who are moved by the Spirit of God that can interpret the Scripture. This is to a large degree also a circular process, i.e., the spirit which enables men to interpret the Scriptures comes to them through the Scriptures. If one expects it to come from outside Scripture and takes credit for such a spirit, the inevitable result will be that one "sets oneself above Scripture" and interprets it according to his own whims and subjects it to his own spirit.³³

This process of self-interpretation presupposes that Scripture is clear in itself. Luther asserts

³¹Gerhard Ebeling, Word and Faith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), p. 306.

³²Althaus, op. cit., p. 76.

³³Ibid., p. 77.

Scripture is not so obscure that tradition is required to understand it. Rather, it possesses "claritas," has illuminating power, so that a clarifying light shines from it. The dark and difficult passages are to be interpreted in the light of the clear passages. The passages Luther could not understand, he assumed God had closed the door and would open their meaning to him when He wanted.³⁴

Luther shared with his contemporaries a belief in the plinary verbal inspiration of the Scriptures.³⁵ He could do this because of his understanding of God's Word as deed and because he firmly believed in the work of the Spirit, so that what Paul declares the Holy Spirit declares and what is contrary to Paul's word is contrary to the Holy Spirit.³⁶ In fact, he followed the Scriptures so closely that he could write, "It is very dangerous to speak of divine things in a different way, and in words different from those which God makes use of."³⁷

Luther's primary principle for interpreting the Scriptures was that they should be read at face value, that

³⁴Carter, op. cit., p. 523.

³⁵Ibid., p. 519.

³⁶Ibid., p. 520.

³⁷Ibid.

the words should be read for their simple and obvious content and meaning.³⁸ He writes, "Whoever takes it upon himself to interpret the words of scripture otherwise than they read has the obligation to prove this from the text of the same passage or from an article of faith."³⁹

We must not misconstrue, understand, and twist them [the words] according to the dictates of reason and philosophy. Rather, we must accept them as God Himself spoke them through the mouth of His prophets and apostles and godly teachers.⁴⁰

Of his own exegesis he says:

I have taken pains, first to treat everything in the simplest manner. I have not allowed myself to be snatched away into so-called "mystic" interpretation if at times laws came up that appeared absurd or foolish to some.⁴¹

Luther placed a strong emphasis upon the simple reading of the Scriptures. He was opposed to other kinds of interpretations and especially the allegorical. Apart from the passages which indicate they were allegorical in their very content, he opposed the allegorical interpretation for two reasons. First, his foremost concern was about matters of faith and salvation. Faith, he believed, was man's response to the preached Word. An allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures often lead to ecstatic or

³⁸Plass, op. cit., III, 4416.

³⁹Pelikan, Luther the Expositor, p. 126.

⁴⁰Plass, op. cit., III, 4416.

⁴¹Martin Luther, "Lectures on Deuteronomy, 1525," in His Works, IX, 6.

ascetic exercises as a means to faith and this stands in direct contrast to the incarnation. Second, the church had used allegory to establish the ideas and doctrines of human reason which led to false doctrine and false tradition.

However, he did not discard allegory completely.

In his preface to the New Testament, he writes:

I have added brief allegories, almost for every chapter. This is not because I attach great importance to them, but I want to forestall the silly attempts at allegorical interpretation that some make Lest the reader be deceived by a false idea in allegories . . . it is a proper allegory when it reveals the ministry of the Word or the progress of the gospel and of faith.⁴²

Also, while Luther assigned the sole authority for interpretation to the Scriptures, he retained the use of church tradition.⁴³ He says that the true method of interpretation puts Scripture along side Scripture in a right and proper way. The church fathers who did this give valuable assistance.

All the books of the fathers must be read with discrimination, not taking their words for granted, but looking whether they quoted clear texts and explain Scripture by other and clearer Scripture.⁴⁴

⁴²Ibid., p. 7.

⁴³Pelikan, Luther the Expositor, p. 72.

⁴⁴Kerr, op. cit., p. 18.

At its best, the tradition was the voice of the church obediently listening to the Word of God and then responding to that Word as the Spirit gave it utterance. Luther believed the fathers wanted to be understood as expositors of the Scriptures and that it is unfair to read them as substitutes for it.

A third part of Luther's exegesis along side his doctrine of the Word and his view of tradition, was his desire to read the Scriptures as history. Not just any history, but a special and particular history; the history of the church as the people of God. The principle that biblical history is always church history enabled him to attach the label "historical" to his exegesis of the Scriptures.⁴⁵

Luther appeals not only to the Word, Scriptures, tradition and history, but also to his own experience. There can be no doubt that experience is one of the principles of his theology and his exegesis. While experience is not the source of knowledge, theological knowledge is won by experiencing it.⁴⁶

⁴⁵Pelikan, Luther the Expositor, p. 89.

⁴⁶Martin Luther, "Against Latomus, 1521," in His Works, XXI, 224.

The New Testament, in spite of its many interesting historical facts and details can be listened to rightly only if there is involvement in the New Testament proclamation that Christ imparts life, if there is trust in him as God's bringer of life.⁴⁷

Luther understood that this testimony wants to be heard as a message proclaiming to each individual the good news of God's saving grace and in turn enabling each individual to love his neighbor.⁴⁸ Luther sees God speaking to man's conscience in such a way that the past and the future become part of the present moment. It cannot be said that once upon a time God was merciful to us or that at some time in the future He will reveal His wrath. The will of God is a single unity, eternal and unchanging.

Luther's most distinctive and important hermeneutical principle is his insistence that " . . . all Scripture is Christological."⁴⁹ He does not ignore the diversity of the Scriptures and is fully aware that the Bible was born in the midst of life and contains laws, historical accounts, prayers, proclamations, prophecy, etc. However, taken theologically as the Word of God, Luther

⁴⁷Werner Georg Kuemmel, "The Continuing Significance of Luther's Prefaces to the New Testament," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXXVII (October 1966), 575.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 574.

⁴⁹Carter, op. cit., p. 522.

sees the Bible as a great unity. It has only one content, Christ. He says, "There is no doubt that all the Scriptures point to Christ alone."⁵⁰ The cross is the substance and goal of God's revelation; Christ is the sum and truth of the Bible. Luther said repeatedly, "Not a single word of the Bible can be rightly understood apart from the cross of Christ. The cross of Christ meets us everywhere in the Bible."⁵¹

Christ is the incarnate Word, the creator, the giver of the promise and the fulfillment of that promise. As the incarnate Word of God, He is the pre-existent Christ in the Old Testament, the historical Christ in the New Testament, and the present Christ by the activity of the Holy Spirit. Luther wrote, "Take Christ out of the Scriptures and what more will you find in them."⁵²

With this theological understanding of the Word of God, Luther took a fresh look at the biblical canon. The books of the Bible could be regarded as the Word of God only to the degree that their sole content is Christ. Using this criteria, he divided the New Testament into three categories. First are the books which show you

⁵⁰Althaus, op. cit., p. 74.

⁵¹Lennart Pinomaa, Faith Victorious (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 45.

⁵²Althaus, op. cit., p. 74.

Christ and everything necessary for salvation, they are: John, Romans, Galations, Ephesians and First Peter. Second are those which simply tell about the work of Christ, they are: Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts, Second Peter, and Second and Third John. Third are those which he questioned as being valid, they are: Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelations.⁵³

⁵³Carter, op. cit., p. 521. Kuemmel, op. cit., p. 577.

CHAPTER IV

THE WORD AND THE CHURCH

Luther took his basic conception of the church from the Apostles' Creed which defines the Church as a communion of saints. He understood this phrase to mean a community or gathering of holy Christian people.¹ This community is called together by the Holy Spirit working through the Word and is preserved by the Word. Thus for Luther, the Word is the decisive characteristic of the church.²

The Word is the most noble and certain mark of the church because the church is conceived, nurtured, reared, fashioned, graced, strengthened and armed by the Word. In brief, the entire life and being of the church depends on the Word.³ Hence, the church's identity and existence is completely tied to the Word. Where the Word is present, there is the church; where the Word is absent, there is no

¹Martin Luther, "On the Councils and the Churches, 1539," in His Works (Philadelphia: Holman, 1931), V, 264.

²Martin Luther, "That These Words of Christ, 'This Is My Body,' etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics, 1527," in His Works (St. Louis: Concordia, 1961), XXXV, 37. "For since the Church owes its birth to the Word, is nourished, aided and strengthened by it, it is obvious that it cannot be without the word. If it is without the word it ceases to be a church."

³Ewald M. Plass (ed.), What Luther Says (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), I, 263.

church.⁴ The Word is made present where the gospel is truly preached and the sacraments rightly administered and where people are observed believing, confessing, and acting according to the Word. Under these conditions, Luther says:

Do not doubt that there must be a true Holy Catholic Church, a Christian, Holy people, even though it be small in number; for God's Word does not go away empty. If there were no other mark than this one alone, it would still be enough to show that there must be a Christian Church there; for God's Word cannot be present without God's people and God's people cannot be without God's Word⁵

Since the church is brought into existence by the Word, Luther thought of the church as the daughter of the Word and not the mother of the Word.⁶ He wanted to make clear that it is the promises of God that makes the church and not the church that makes the promises of God. This is another way of his stating that Scripture⁷ is superior to the church. He defended himself, both on the right against

⁴Martin Luther, "Right and Power of a Christian Congregation, 1523," in His Works (1931), IV, 75.

⁵Luther, "On the Councils and the Churches, 1539," V, 271.

⁶Plass, op. cit., I, 287.

⁷Ibid., I, 267. "The church is born of the Word of promise through faith, and is nurtured and preserved by the same Word. This means that the promises of God make the Church, not the church the promises of God: or the Word of God is incomparably superior to the church. In this Word, the church, as a creation, has nothing to establish, ordain, or make, but is only to be established, ordained and made."

the papacy and on the left against foes in his own following as he set himself to the constructive task of rebuilding the church on the basis of the Word.⁸ And although he considered the church to be the daughter of the Word, he also viewed the church as a mother which gives birth to Christians through the Word.⁹

Church Must Be Obedient to the Word

Luther describes the church as God's maid and servant who listens to the Word and obeys it faithfully.¹⁰ The church has divine authority only when it hears and follows the Word of God.¹¹ When the Word is not obeyed, the church ceases to exist and it has no authority. However, when the Word is heard and obeyed, there is the church, regardless of where the Word is heard, even though it be in a cow stable, the place where Christ was born.¹² Hence, humility and reverential fear in the presence of

⁸Conrad Bergendoff, "Introduction to Volume 40," in Luther, Works, XL, xii.

⁹Martin Luther, "Sermons, 1510-1546," in His Works, LI, 166. "The Christian Church is your mother, who gives birth to you and bears you through the Word. And this is done by the Holy Spirit who bears witness concerning Christ."

¹⁰Plass, op. cit., I, 265.

¹¹Ibid., I, 287.

¹²Ibid., I, 264.

God's Word is the true token of the genuine Holy Church.¹³ Luther was fond of using the story of Noah to illustrate how the church needed to obey the Word. Also, the Book of Genesis provided him with ample proof for his contention that the Word of God was always constitutive of the Church.¹⁴ In Exodus, he found that Moses draws the conclusion that when the patriarchs abandoned worship and the Word of God, they fell into sensuality and lust. They became tyrants and made inroads on the possessions of others. They lapsed into idolatry and plunged into all vices of concupiscence and lost discipline in all the appetites.¹⁵ In the same way, "After the popes had abandoned the knowledge of God, His Word, and His worship, they proceeded to turn their ecclesiastical distinction into carnal luxury."¹⁶

Luther says Scripture speaks of the church in a very simple way. "According to Scripture, the church is the assembly of all those on earth who believe in Christ."¹⁷ In the Word of the gospel, Christ Himself is

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Jaroslav Pelikan, Luther the Expositor (St. Louis Concordia, 1959), p. 101.

¹⁵Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis, 1535," in His Works, II, 30.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁷Plass, op. cit., I, 260.

present in His saving power. He builds up the church which is His body by drawing all men to Himself.¹⁸ The church is the pupil of Christ, hearing His Word, so that it may learn of its proper conduct and work.¹⁹ Also, when Christ is remembered and recited in the church, the church becomes a redemptive community.²⁰ It becomes both a community of the redeemed and a community which communicates redemption. "The redemptive deed of God thus becomes an act of redemption now, as the Word of God in the church makes that deed contemporary."²¹ One of the greatest things about this community for Luther was that the gospel is always near and present and surrounds us everywhere in fellow Christians.²² He writes:

God has been so gracious to us that he has stuffed every corner of the world full with God's word, that is, in the form of brethern, fellow Christians in the community.²³

¹⁸Chrill Eastwood, "Luther's Conception of the Church," Scottish Journal of Theology, II (March 1958), 28. "In the word of the Gospel, Christ Himself is present in His saving power, to evoke faith, to reconcile sinful men with the Holy God, and to build up the Church which is His Body by drawing all men to Himself."

¹⁹Plass, op. cit., p. 268.

²⁰Pelikan, op. cit., p. 62.

²¹Ibid., p. 63.

²²Paul Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 318.

²³Ibid.

No Salvation Outside of Church

Luther also believed there is no salvation outside the community of saints. In his view, a sinner can come to Christ only with the help of the gospel proclaimed in the church. "Anyone who is to find Christ must first find the church."²⁴ By church he does not mean membership in an organization. Rather, what he has in mind is the saving Word by which one learns of salvation. There is no salvation apart from the Word, and wherever the Word is proclaimed, there is the church. It follows then that if a person is to hear the saving Word, it will be in the church because the church is where the saving Word is proclaimed. Also connected to this belief is that God works through external means.²⁵ The Word always has connected with it its external expressions. It is then, Luther believes, in the community of holy people that God makes His Word present. It is in the redeemed community that God

²⁴Lennart Pinomaa, Faith Victorious (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 117.

²⁵Gordon Rupp, "Luther and the Doctrine of the Church," Scottish Journal of Theology, IX (December 1956), 386. "In a remarkable letter Luther wrote: 'For the Church must appear in the world. But it can only appear in a covering, a veil, a shell, or some kind of outward clothes which a man can grasp, otherwise it can never be found. But such a mask is a Married Man, or somebody else in domestic life. John, Peter, Martin, Amsdorf, etc., and yet none of them is the Church which is neither man nor wife, Jew nor Greek, but Christ alone.'"

communicates His redemptive Word. Apart from this external means there is no communication of the Word, and consequently, no salvation.

Holy Spirit Necessary

While Luther views the Word as the constitutive element of the church, he also makes it clear that the Word is powerless without the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that speaks the Word to the heart and causes the heart to have faith in the Word. Without the Holy Spirit, the proclamation of the Word and correct doctrine do not constitute the church. The proclamation of the Word must be believed, and without this response of faith, the church does not exist. But the response of faith is impossible apart from the working of the Holy Spirit.²⁶ However, it is the Holy Spirit working through the Word and not by itself that makes believers and calls the church into existence. Luther writes:

The Holy Spirit reveals and preaches the Word, and by it he illumines and kindles hearts so that they grasp and accept it, cling to it, and preserve it Where he does not cause the Word to be preached and does not awaken understanding in the heart, all is lost.²⁷

²⁶Eastwood, op. cit., p. 23.

²⁷The Book of Concord (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 416.

The Holy Spirit not only calls the church into existence through the Word, but also works in and through the church to proclaim the Word and do His work. Watson points out that it is the proper work of the Spirit to make the church a "community of saints" as Luther defines it.²⁸ That is, to make the church a community of holy people.²⁹ To be a holy people does not mean that one must be a papist. Rather, Luther points out even a seven-year old child knows what the church is, namely, holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their shepherd. Its holiness does not consist of surplices, tonsures, or ceremonies, but consists of the Word of God and true faith.³⁰

Preaching is Basic Task of the Church

Luther also emphasized that it is the oral proclamation of the Word that is most fundamental to the

²⁸Phillip Watson, Let God Be God (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 168.

²⁹Luther, "On the Councils and the Churches, 1539," V, 267, 270. "For Christian Holiness or the holiness of universal Christendom is that which comes when the Holy Spirit gives people faith in Christ, He makes heart, soul, body, works and all manner of life new First, this Christian holy people is to be known by this, that it has God's Word, It is the high, chief, holy possession from which the Christian people take the name "Holy," for God's Word is holy and sanctifies everything it touches,"

³⁰The Book of Concord, p. 315.

total life of the church. Addressing himself to the students at Wittenberg, he continually urged them to remember that the basis of the church's life was the Word of God, whose basic form was the oral word of preaching. One of his favorite descriptive phrases was that "the church is not a pen house but a mouth house." In part, his emphasis on this point was based on the fact that Christ never wrote anything but always spoke; that the New Testament which he sometimes identified as the gospel, was not intended to be a written document but a living witness. A second reason for his emphasis on the oral word was the psychological judgment that the spoken word was a living word and carried with it the power to address each man as an individual. This, Luther believed, makes the gospel contemporary, so that God addresses Himself to the contemporary situation through a living servant who faithfully proclaims the Word.

Preaching is the most certain of the external marks of the church. Wherever the gospel is preached, there is the kingdom of God and this mark of the church cannot deceive.³¹ Christ left behind as an outward sign the oral

³¹Plass, op. cit., p. 315. "Wherever this Gospel is truthfully and purely preached, there is the kingdom of Christ; and this mark of the church or the kingdom of Christ cannot deceive you. Or, wherever the Word is, there the Holy Spirit is, either in the hearer or the teacher . . . for the Word has ever been the one constant and infallible mark of the Church."

preaching by which His people were to be recognized.³² It is this preaching about Christ that is constitutive of the church. Luther writes:

Now the certain mark of the Christian congregation is the preaching of the Gospel in its purity . . . of this we have God's sure promise in Isaiah 55:10 'My word that goes forth out of my mouth, shall not return unto me void; but as the rain cometh down from heaven and waters the earth, so shall my words accomplish all things whereto I send it.' Hence, we are certain that where the gospel is preached, there must be Christians no matter how few in number or how sinful and frail they be; just as where the gospel is not preached and the doctrines of men hold sway, there can be no Christians but only heathens.³³

By preaching, the church obeys the command of its Lord to go and preach. Luther says Christ did not command the apostles to write, but only to preach. Preaching is the task of the church--the community of saints, it is not the private province of a minister. It is the proper task of the whole congregation to bear witness to the Word of God. In brief, the preaching of the Word effects a twofold purpose. First, it brings the believer into a true relationship with Christ through faith; and it unites all believers in a common dignity, a common calling, and a common privilege.

³²Luther, "On the Councils and the Churches, 1539," V, 271.

³³Luther, "Right and Power of a Christian Congregation, 1523," IV, 75.

CHAPTER V

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Thus far I have been discussing the theology of the Word of God in Luther's thought. Only occasionally have the historical implications of the theology been mentioned, though throughout it has been clear that the Word is an incarnate Word and that its historical existence is a necessary part of the Word. Thus, a discussion of theology of the Word must include the means which the Word has used to extend itself into historical existence. To do this, I am including a number of subjects under the general heading "The Ministry of the Word." The one thing they all have in common is that they are a means used by the Word to speak to and become a part of history and salvation. Or, put another way, the means used by the Word is in fact its incarnate existence and historical expression. The first and most obvious ministry of the Word is the office of the ministry itself.

Office of the Ministry

The office of the ministry has its foundation in the Word of God and the proper task of the minister is none

other than the administering of that Word.¹ Luther writes: "The ministry of the Word was instituted in order that people might learn the Word of God."² Strictly speaking, the office of the ministry refers to the public office to which a Christian has been called to serve the entire community. However, the office of the ministry also has a broader base. Luther asserts that since the Word belongs to all Christians, all Christians are priests and are bound by love to be ministers of the Word to their neighbors.

The ministry of the Word is grounded in Christ. On the one hand Christ is the Word incarnate; on the other hand, Christ's ministry was a ministry of the Word. To carry on His own ministry, Christ called apostles and sent them into the world to preach the gospel. The apostles in turn called and sent others. Through the new birth, all are brothers with Christ; and if all are brothers,

¹Martin Luther, "Right and Power of a Christian Congregation, 1523," in His Works (Philadelphia: Holman, 1931), IV, 74; The ministry is nothing else than a ministry of the Word. Martin Luther, "Table Talk," in His Works (St. Louis: Concordia, 1967), LIV, 100; Here is a definition: a minister is one who is placed in the church for the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. Martin Luther, "The Pagan Servitude of the Church, 1520," in Martin Luther; Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings (Garden City: Doubleday, 1961), p. 345; The priesthood is simply a ministry of the Word.

²Martin Luther, "Sermons, 1510-1546," in His Works, LI, 145.

therefore, " . . . all are priests, as He is Priest, sons as He is Son, kings as He is King."³ Those who are called to the priesthood are privileged to do the same work for which Christ was sent.

Although the office of the ministry is grounded in the Word and the ministry of Christ, its immediate source and authority is from the Christian community. In the community of believers all possess the Word and are taught of God and annointed into the priesthood.⁴ Luther documents this priesthood of believers by frequently quoting I Peter 2:9, "You are a chosen race, a royal

³Martin Luther, "Concerning the Ministry, 1523," in His Works, LI, 145.

⁴Ibid., p. 23. The ministry of the Word is the highest office in the church, it is unique and belongs to all who are Christians, not only by right but by command. Indeed it is not a priesthood if it is not unique and common to all.; Luther, "The Pagan Servitude of the Church, 1520," p. 345. All of us who are Christians are also priests. Martin Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, 1520," in His Works, XXXVI, 116. Let everyone, therefore, who knows himself to be a Christian, be assured of this, that we are equally priests, that is to say, we have the same power in respect to the Word and the sacraments. Luther, "Right and Power of a Christian Congregation, 1523," IV, 80. If Christians have the Word of God . . . they are in duty bound to confess, preach, and spread this Word. There is no other Word of God than that which is given to all Christians to proclaim. There is no other baptism than the one which any Christian can bestow. There is no other remembrance of the Lord's Supper than that which any Christian can observe and which Christ has instituted. There is no other kind of sin than that which any Christian can bind or loose. There is no other sacrifice than that of the body of every Christian. No one but a Christian can pray. No one but a Christian may judge of doctrine. These make the priestly and royal office.

priesthood."⁵ Since all have the right to be ministers of the Word, "How much more does a community as a whole have both the right and the command to commit by common vote such an office to one or more."⁶ In seeking to make such a selection, Christians individually and in common should pray in humility and confession seeking the guidance of the Spirit and when the heart is right, gather and elect from the community itself a worthy and able minister. Luther strongly insists, where there is a group of Christians, a person should not take upon himself the public office which properly belongs to all.⁷ However, where there is no Christian community to call a minister, the Christian needs no other call than the fact that he is a Christian and is inwardly called and anointed by God. Under such circumstances, "He is bound to preach to the erring

⁵Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, 1520," XXXVI, 112. For thus it is written in I Peter 2:9. 'You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, and a priestly royalty.' Therefore we are all priests, as many of us as are Christians. But the priests, as we call them, are ministers chosen from among us. All that they do is done in our name; the priesthood is nothing but a ministry. This we learn from I Cor. 4:1: 'This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.'

⁶Luther, "Concerning the Ministry, 1523," XXXX, 36. In the Word we see more clearly and surely than by any light or assurance whence priests or ministers of the Word are to be sought, namely, from the flock of Christ alone, and nowhere else.

⁷Luther, "The Pagan Servitude of the Church, 1520," p. 349.

heathens or nonchristians and to teach them the gospel, even though no one has called him to this task."⁸

The necessity of the public office is largely sociological. Although all Christians are priests, not all should publicly minister. A universal public ministry would lead to confusion and dissension because everyone would want to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments and no one would yield. Therefore, for the sake of order, the public office is to be committed to one person. Luther rejects the Roman Catholic idea that the priests receive an indelible character. Since a priest is made a priest by the call of the community and since the priesthood is nothing else than a form of service, there is no reason why a priest cannot also be removed and again be a layman.⁹

The distinction between the public and private office of the ministry is not of kind but of scope. The person called to the public office is responsible to be a minister to the entire community. The individual Christian is bound by love to be a minister to his neighbor. But as

⁸Luther, "Right and Power of a Christian Congregation, 1523," IV, 80.

⁹Luther, "The Pagan Servitude of the Church, 1520," p. 350. According to Scripture . . . priesthood is a form of service. I quite fail to see the reason why a man, who has once become a priest, cannot again become a layman since he only differs from the laity by his ministry The fiction of the "indelible character" has long been ridiculous.

ministers, both are called to be servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Both are called to be ministers of the Word, a ministry which is the highest office in the church.

Although the ministry of the Word includes the many things, when Luther thinks of the ministry he has in mind primarily the task of preaching. He liked to think of his own ministry as a ministry of the oral Word. Preaching is the place where the Word becomes a living Word and actively moves into the world. Preaching is the basic work of the church and the privilege and duty of every Christian.

Inasmuch as the office of preaching the gospel is the greatest of all and certainly is apostolic, it becomes the foundation for all the other functions Even Christ chiefly proclaimed the gospel as the highest function of his office and did not baptize. Paul, too, gloried in the fact that he was sent not to baptize . . . but to the primary office of preaching the gospel.¹⁰

Word as Proclamation

Proclamation is the most basic and fundamental ministry of the Word. It is for the proclamation of the gospel that the church was established and ministers ordained. It is through the proclamation of the gospel that faith is established and men are saved.

¹⁰Luther, "Concerning the Ministry, 1523," XXXX, 36.

The gospel, by its very nature, is an oral proclamation. As a Greek scholar, Luther discovered that "evangel" (gospel) means a good message, a good tidings, good news, a good report which one sings and tells with rejoicing. As a biblical scholar he asserts that this good news is about the Son of God who became man, suffered, and was raised again through the Holy Spirit for our salvation. And, as a preacher, he ties these two together by saying:

The gospel is nothing else than the preaching and proclaiming of the grace and mercy of God which Jesus Christ has earned and gained for us through his death. It is properly not something written down with letters in a book but more an oral proclamation and a living word: a voice which sounds forth into the whole world and is proclaimed publicly so that we may hear it everywhere.¹¹

The oral proclamation gives the gospel an existential meaning that is not possible for the written Scriptures to convey. The personal expression of the gospel is necessary because the gospel is more than a statement of truth, it is a summons to men. An astute observer of human nature, Luther realized that nothing can speak so directly and intimately to the lives of men as another man sharing personally what has happened to him. Thus, Luther describes the gospel as a living Word because it is preached by a living man with a living voice about a living Christ who speaks to a living situation.

¹¹Paul Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 73.

Proclamation is an External Word

When God speaks His living Word to men, there are always two levels of communication involved. These two levels are an outward Word and an inner Word. The outward Word comes from outside and is perceived by the senses. Its most common expressions are: the Scriptures, the sacraments, and the sermon. They include such concrete means as: written words, bread, wine, water and spoken words. The inner Word does not come from the outside but is spoken to the heart from within by the Holy Spirit. The oral proclamation of the gospel is an external or outward Word.

The outward Word is necessary because it is impossible for man to worship God in His majesty. In his early years, Luther sought to worship God in his uttermost Holiness but always was frustrated and driven to despair. Later, he came to believe that God, in His majesty and nakedness, cannot be grasped or understood apart from external and outward means. God does not manifest Himself except through His Word and works because it is only in this way that He can, in some measure, be understood. Thus, God humbled and adjusted Himself to our humanity. The outward means God uses to reveal Himself Luther called masks or faces or clothing. Luther points out that the people of Israel did not worship God "absolutely" or sit

around as the monks do and think about God as He is in Himself. Rather, God was the God of the fathers who gave His promise. In like manner, the Prophets talk about the God of the children of Israel who has revealed Himself in history and in certain words and places. Unlike the Turks whose God is vague, the God of the fathers has limited Himself to a certain place, word and sign so that He might be acknowledged and grasped. And, David talks about a sure God or Promiser whose promises he knows and whose mercy he has felt. Although David makes no reference to Christ, he refers to God as He is clothed in His Word and promise. This promise, according to Luther, is the promise of Christ.

While God uses all kinds of external means to reveal Himself, it is in the spoken Word of the gospel that the risen Christ becomes present. As God once clothed Himself in the flesh and humanity of Jesus, so He now clothes Himself in the spoken Word of the gospel. For this reason, the spoken or preached Word stands as one of the central pillars in Luther's theology as one of the incarnate means which God uses to encounter men. God uses the preached Word as the means by which He can remain God in His majesty and remain hidden, and yet, at the same time, be present and speak His Word to His people.

Holy Spirit Speaks External Word to the Heart

Although the outward Word is the only means God uses when He chooses to write His own living Word on the heart, the outward Word is limited and can only speak to the ear. It is the inner Word or Spirit that must speak the Word to the heart. Luther writes:

Because it is not in my power or hand to fashion the hearts of men as the potter molds the clay and fashion them at my pleasure. I can get no further than their ears; their hearts, I cannot reach That is God's work alone, who causes faith to live in the heart. Therefore we should give free course to the Word and not add our own works to it. We have the right to speak but not the power to accomplish. We should preach the Word, but the results must be left solely to God's good pleasure.¹²

If the Spirit does not speak the Word of God to the heart, the outward Word remains the Word of man. By speaking the outward Word to the heart, the Holy Spirit makes the outward Word become the Word of God "for me." The Spirit turns what Luther calls words of men or "dead words" into the Word of God or living words. Thus it is the work of the Spirit that makes the preached Word a living Word. "And," Luther says, "if someone experiences love toward the Word . . . he should know that this is not a word of human will or reason but a gift of the Holy Spirit."¹³ Apart from the Spirit, the hearer of the

¹²Luther, "Sermons, 1510-1546," LI, 76.

¹³Martin Luther, "Lectures on Galatians, 1535," in His Works, XXVI, 376.

preached Word is in the same condition as a deaf man.

"Even adults cannot hear the Word of God unless the Spirit promotes growth inwardly."¹⁴ The sermon, the Scriptures, and the sacraments, all outward words, must wait upon the Spirit to speak the Word of God to the heart.

The Word and the Spirit

The content of the outward Word and the inner Word is identical. The Spirit does not speak a different Word to the heart than the outward Word speaks to the ear. The Word of God is one Word, but because it is an incarnate Word, both the outward and inner Word must be present before it can become a living Word. The outward Word and the Spirit are interdependent on one another.

The Word may exist without the Spirit, but without the Spirit it is simply a letter. As a letter it is a law and can only give a description of the life we are to lead, but it does not give the life it describes. In the same manner, the Spirit can exist without the Word as God's own high majesty and eternal glory. But the Spirit cannot be God's revealing Spirit without the outward Word. While the task of the Spirit is to make the risen Christ real and present among us, the risen Christ can only be present in His humanity. Thus, the Word may be without the Spirit but

¹⁴Martin Luther, "Lectures on Galatians, 1519," in His Works, XXVI, 249.

not as the Word of God; and the Spirit may be without the Word, but not as the revealing Spirit.

The Spirit makes the difference whether Christ is understood as law or gospel. Where Christ is merely an idea, example, or historical figure He is a law and the Word is dead. Where Christ is present in the Word as a living person, as a gift, there the Word is alive. The difference depends on the work of the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit makes Christ present, the Word and Spirit are one; Christ is the Word of God and the Word of God is Christ. Also, the Holy Spirit works in such a way that Christ is present in the outward Word as He was once present in the flesh of Jesus. The outward Word is the "body" by which the risen Christ is present here and now.

Luther holds in tension the work of the outward and inner Word as God's means to salvation. Included in this tension is the motion of faith which is the movement away from trusting in the outward Word, i.e., law and works to trusting in the gospel and the work of Spirit. He also holds in tension man's responsibility for believing, while at the same time trusting in God as the giver of faith. Luther offers no logical answer to this dilemma, but rather sees in it the dynamics of faith. The Christian is left hanging on to both horns of this dilemma, knowing that it is God who gives faith and salvation, but knowing also that as a person he is responsible to believe. It is necessary

to hold this outward Word and inner Word in tension, because if the sovereignty of the Spirit and the insufficiency of the outward Word are emphasized, it becomes a doctrine of predestination. If, on the other hand, the outward Word is emphasized and the Spirit is secondary to it, it becomes a doctrine of works and free will. Neither of these were acceptable to Luther.

It is this kind of tension between the Word as law and gospel and between the outward Word and the Spirit that the Christian must live. It is to this kind of dilemma then to which the gospel of Christ comes as a promise, hope and refreshing rain.

In Jesus Christ, the outward Word and inner Word form a unity. In Jesus Christ, the Word becomes incarnate in a body of flesh. Or put another way, in Jesus Christ the inner Word, Christ, becomes one with the outward Word, which is the life and humanity of the person Jesus. And, just as Christ came and made Himself known in Jesus, so the inner Word is revealed and made comprehensible by the outward Word. This does not dissolve the tension between the outward and inner Word, but it does help a person realize that this is the means God uses to make Himself present. By understanding this is what God did in Jesus Christ helps us to understand and identify this tension in our own lives as the work of God.

Christ is the only true Word of God. The outward words in Scripture, Sacraments, sermon and even the historical Jesus can never directly be identified as God's Word. Rather, it is only when the Holy Spirit makes Christ present in these outward Words that they become God's own living Word. The outward Word is dependent on the Holy Spirit to make Christ present. But at the same time, the Holy Spirit is dependent on the outward Word to make Christ comprehensible.

When the Spirit speaks the Word of God to the heart, it brings about a change that Paul and Luther refer to as a new creation. The Word spoken by the Spirit implants a new intellect and will and confers the power to curb the flesh, so that which was once admired is now detested. The new creation is not a sham or merely a new outward appearance, but rather, a new attitude and new judgment come into being. It is not a superficial change in outward manner, but is a renewal of the mind which in turn is followed by a new light, a new understanding, a new perspective, and a new motivation which brings about a renewal of the senses. The ear longs to hear the Word of God instead of the traditions of men. The eyes, ears, and lips not only see, hear and speak from a different

perspective, but the mind itself evaluates things and acts upon them differently than before.¹⁵

First the Word and Then the Spirit

There is, however, one definite relationship between the outward Word and the Spirit. First the Word is preached and then the Spirit follows. This order is never reversed or bypassed. Luther writes:

The Son of God is not taught, learned or judged by any human wisdom or by the Law itself; it is revealed by God, first by the external Word and then inwardly through the Spirit. Therefore the Gospel is a divine Word that came down from heaven and is revealed by the Holy Spirit, who was sent for this very purpose. Yet this happens in such a way that the external Word must come first. For Paul himself did not have an inward revelation until he had heard the outward Word from heaven, namely, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?" Thus he heard the outward Word first; only then did there follow revelations, the knowledge of the Word, faith and the gifts of the Spirit.¹⁶

This order of first the Word and then the Spirit, Luther derived from the gospels where the apostles stated that wherever the Word was preached the Holy Spirit descended. In response to this, Luther reasoned that this is the case because God wants us as workers with Himself;

¹⁵Martin Luther, "Lectures on Galatians, 1535," in His Works, XXVII, 140.

¹⁶Luther, "Lectures on Galatians, 1535," XXVI, 73.

and by first hearing the Word we also have a responsibility in the development of our own faith and Christian life.¹⁷

However, the Holy Spirit works at its own good time and good pleasure. Luther says that in preaching it is the voice that carries the Word, but once the Word is preached, the voice disappears and the substance of the Word remains with the hearer. It is then when the substance of the Word latent in the heart is spoken to the heart by the Spirit that it becomes a living Word. Although in most cases the Spirit comes immediately, there is no assurance that it will. In matters of timing, the Spirit is a free agent and can choose to speak the Word to the heart when it chooses which may be immediately, or in a short period of time or even after ten years or more.

A second relationship between the outward Word and Spirit is that the Spirit follows the Word as fulfillment follows a promise. The outward Word promises Christ and the Spirit, at His disgression, gives Christ as a gift. Luther believed that where the outward Word was proclaimed, the Spirit would necessarily follow, but that it could not be stated when, where or under what circumstances. The other side is also true. The Spirit can direct the outward Word to an individual to assure him of the presence of

¹⁷Martin Luther, The Bondage of the Will (Westwood, N. J: Revell, 1957), p. 184. Is pleased God not to give the Spirit without the Word, but through the Word; that he might have us as workers together with him.

Christ. Thus the Spirit can both direct the outward Word and make it present as the living Christ.

Although Luther developed in his early studies the conviction that the outward Word must precede the Spirit, it served him well later on in his opposition to the spiritualists. The spiritualists stated that the Spirit could, by itself, illumine the heart apart from the Word. Luther adamantly objected to this because it opens the door to all kinds of human speculations which may in no way be related to the God who revealed Himself in Jesus Christ and in history. By asserting that the outward Word must first be preached, Luther defends the gospel of Christ against the imaginations of men's minds. Unless Christ is preached, he says, there is no Holy Spirit and where Christ is preached the Spirit comes to write that Word of Christ on the heart.

Ex Opere Operato

Although there is a promise--fulfillment relationship between the outward Word and the Spirit--together they become a living Word. Luther viewed this living Word as an active, powerful, effective entity in and of itself.¹⁸ He

¹⁸Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis, 1535," in His Works, II, 30. To give my own opinion about the Word, I believe that it should be explained neither in a neutral nor in a passive sense, but in an active sense.; The Book of Concord (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 379

believed the effectiveness of God's Word was not dependent upon human works but in and of itself could effect a greater change than anything a man could do. Thus, Heiko Oberman could write in his article, "Reformation, Preaching, and Ex Opere Operato:"

It should not surprise us that Luther also teaches an "ex opere operato" doctrine . . . as the certain presence of the Word of God in the mouth of the preacher: "Yes, I hear the sermon; but who is speaking? The minister? No, indeed! You do not hear the minister. True, the voice is his; but my God is speaking the Word which he preaches or speaks."¹⁹

Luther made some of his clearest statements regarding the independence and effectiveness of the Word in March, 1522 when he returned to Wittenberg from his exile in Wartburg.²⁰ His return became necessary because the churches were in serious turmoil. Some of Luther's own followers, especially Karstadt and Zwilling, had gone too

(see also: Luther, Works, XXXVII, 133.) When we seriously ponder the Word, hear it, and put it to use, such is its power that never departs without fruit. It always awakens new understanding, new pleasure, and a new spirit of devotion, and it constantly cleanses the heart and its meditations. For these words are not idle or dead, but effective and living.; Luther, "Sermons, 1510-1546," LI, 76. God and His Word should be allowed to work alone, without our work or interference We must preach the Word, but the results must be left solely to God's good pleasure.

¹⁹Heiko A. Oberman, "Reformation, Preaching, and Ex Opere Operato" in Christianity Divided (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), p. 232.

²⁰Luther, "Sermons, 1510-1546," LI, 67-100.

far in their efforts to effect reform. While Luther could not agree with the Roman practices and opposed them himself, he was even in stronger disagreement with the destructive means being used by his radical followers.

Upon his return from exile he told the Wittenberg congregation that they were a great disappointment to him because they had been destroying the churches and handling the sacraments. In contrast, to these means and as alternative to them, he asserted that where God's Word is preached and allowed to work, in time a new understanding would prevail and reform would inevitably come powerfully and peacefully. Of his own experience he recalled:

I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing, and while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.²¹

Also, he pointed out that if people are compelled to change by force, it is of no avail because the new position is not their own. Rather, he counsels, first the heart must be won and then the people will change out of their own will. Concerning his own effort to bring about reform, Luther says: "In short, I will preach [the Word] , teach it, write it, but I will constrain no man by force, for faith must come freely and without compulsion."²²

²¹Ibid., p. 77.

²²Ibid., p. 76.

The Word and the Sacrament

In the preceding paragraphs, the oral proclamation of the Word was emphasized to the extent that it would seem that the sacraments would be insignificant. However, it is the "Word" that stands at the center of the church's life and one means of communicating the Word is not of a greater rank than another. The Word of judgment and forgiveness is as present in the eating and drinking of the sacrament as in the preaching and hearing of the sermon. Thus, it is the presence of the Word that makes the sermon the Sermon, and the sacrament the Sacrament. The sermon and the sacrament are not in competition, but are both sacramental expressions of the Word of God.

Luther states that the sacrament is the combination of a promise and a sign. He frequently quotes Augustine's rule: "When the Word is added to the elements it becomes a Sacrament."²³ A promise without a sign is simply a promise; a sign without the promise is simply a material object, historical event, or symbolic act. Both the promise and the sign must be instituted by God. Strictly speaking, Christ Himself is the basic sacrament for in Him, God unites His promise and a sign. Christ is the promised Messiah of the Old Testament whom God promises to dwell

²³Althaus, op. cit., p. 345.

with us. The sign that indicates the fulfillment of this promise is the humanity of Christ. Under the cover of the humanity of Christ, God is secretly present fulfilling the promise. Luther believed that Christ instituted only two sacraments for His followers in which the promise and sign were appropriately joined. These are baptism and the Lord's Supper. For only in these is there both a sign instituted by God and the promise of forgiveness of sins.²⁴

The promise is the Word of God. It is the gospel of God concerning Christ. It is the offer of salvation and forgiveness of sins. It is, by its very nature, a gift. It is, Luther believed, the only means God has ever used to deal with mankind. The sign, on the other hand, is a material object. Luther believed God does not give His Word of promise without including something material and outward as a confirmation of that promise. For example, to Abraham God gave His Word including with it his son, Isaac. The outward material object becomes a sign simply because God chooses it as such. It is a medium in which God chooses to reveal His grace. However, it is the Word of

²⁴Martin Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, 1520," in His Works (1915), II, 291. It has seemed best to restrict the name of "sacrament" to such promises as have signs attached to them. The remainder, not being bound to signs, are bear promises. Hence, there are, strictly speaking, but two sacraments in the church of God--baptism and bread; for only in these two do we find both the divinely instituted sign and the promise of forgiveness of sins.

promise that is the decisive element of the sacraments. The sacrament is nothing without the Word. It has no other content and no other effect than the Word of promise does. "Therefore, let us open our eyes and learn to pay more attention to the Word than to the sign, to faith than to the works or ritual."²⁵ Regarding baptism, Luther frequently quotes Mark 16:16, "He who believes and is baptised will be saved." "This promise," Luther writes, "is far superior to all outer show of works, vows, orders and whatever else men have introduced. Our entire salvation depends on this promise."²⁶ In the Lord's Supper is the greatest promise of all for Christ adds as a sign His own body and blood in the bread and wine and says, "This is my body which is given for you." (Luke 22:19) These words of institution Luther called his final fortress in battle because it is the promise of Christ's presence. Those gathered for the Lord's Supper were also, for Luther, a sure sign of the community of saints with Christ incorporated in that community.

For the sacrament to be effective, Luther does not let it depend on the work of God alone but upon cooperation between the grace of God and the faith of man. In a sense,

²⁵Ibid., p. 229.

²⁶Luther, "The Pagan Servitude of the Church, 1520," p. 293.

this is a superficial point in light of the fact that Luther considers faith itself to be a work of God. But he stresses that both the word of promise and sign of confirmation must be accepted by faith in order to emphasize the divine character of the sacrament and that an unconditional surrender to God's grace is a vital part of the sacramental act. "In the sacraments, promise and faith are necessarily yoked together."²⁷ They are correlated. For where faith is mentioned, there must be a promise on which it can lay hold. Where a promise is mentioned there must be a faith which can grasp it. The promise excludes any attempt of justification by law. Faith excludes any attempt of justification by works. In the same manner, faith lays hold of the external element as the confirmation of the promise; where the sign is mentioned, there must be faith to grasp it as such. In this way, faith serves as the connector of the promise and the sign and binds them together to form the sacrament. Without faith as a vital part of the sacrament, the external confirmation loses its special function.

The external sign makes the sacrament unique because it gives it a physical character. In baptism and the Lord's Supper, physical acts are done to our body and

²⁷Regin Prenter, Spiritus Creator (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1953), p. 139; Luther, "The Pagan Servitude of the Church, 1520," p. 277.

our bodies participate in these acts.

We poor men since we live in our five senses, must always have, along with our words, at least one outward sign on which we may lay hold and around which we may gather; this sign may be a sacrament, that is, it may be external and yet contain and express something spiritual, so that through the external we may be drawn into the spiritual, comprehending the external with the eyes of the body, the spiritual and inward with eyes of the heart.²⁸

The physical character of the sacrament is a seal or pledge that can be grasped by the senses and appropriated by the heart. Luther believed that the external object is a help to faith and that it would be foolish to separate faith from the object to which it is attached. The sacraments which are appropriated by our bodies are also valid for our bodies. "Through its physical character the sacrament assures us that our bodies are also intended for eternal life and blessedness."²⁹ Also, Luther says that Christ gives us His own body as nourishment, in order with such a pledge He may assure and promise us that our bodies too shall live forever, because it partakes here on earth of an everlasting food.

Luther also asserts that the sacraments have certain advantages over the spoken Word. There are times in the life of a Christian that neither prayer nor

²⁸Martin Luther, "Treatise on the New Testament, 1520," in His Works (1915), I, 301.

²⁹Althaus, op. cit., p. 347.

preaching nor exegesis can provide the assurance needed. At such times, the sacraments through which individual ministry can provide the way for the redemptive Word of God to address a specific situation. Unlike preaching, the sacrament is designated specifically for the individual receiving it.

It is something more than a public sermon; for although the same thing is present in the sermon as in the sacrament, here there is the advantage it is directed to a definite individual.³⁰

It is this individual mediation of the Word that assists the person to accept the promise of God as his own.

The external elements not only give a distinct advantage and physical character to the sacraments, they contribute to a meaningful symbolic understanding of the sacrament. In his own doctrine of the sacraments, Luther retained the symbolic concept of the middle ages which asserted that the sacraments express a unity of the visible elements and the invisible grace.

Word and Faith

Although the Word has many theological meanings, the primary function of the Word is to establish faith. The theological meanings of the Word, namely, Christ, God,

³⁰Martin Luther, "The Sacrament . . . Against the Fanatics, 1526," in His Works, XXXVI, 348.

Scripture, and law and gospel help to interpret the Word so that it may be understood and related to our experience of the Word, and in that way, it establishes faith by identification. The practical extensions of the Word in preaching and the church are the physical means the Word uses to speak itself to present generations that faith may be established. Thus, whatever aspect of Luther's doctrine of the Word is being discussed, the background and reason for the discussion is that faith may be established. The reason for all this is that faith is the proper status of the Christian. Faith is what the whole thing is about. Faith is salvation. Faith is our proper stance before God. Faith is the experience of a new life and a participation now in the life eternal. Faith is the personal certainty that God, in His Word, is true and that His promises are "for me." Faith is the basis of Christian love toward one's neighbor.

The content of faith is the Word of God.³¹ But God's Word is God Himself. It is in the Word that God makes Himself present. It is through faith in the Word

³¹Martin Luther, "That These Words of Christ, 'This Is My Body,' etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics, 1527," in His Works, XXXVII, 109. For we wish to build our faith not upon men's but upon God's Word, the one rock.

that the God who is hidden is known.³² Thus, faith in the Word is faith in God. The Word is both the means to faith and the object of faith. As the means to faith, the Word is the gospel which is to be preached and heard. It is that by which a person can hear and grasp hold of the promises of God. As the object of faith, the Word is God Himself incarnate to the present generations. By identifying the Word and God as the same, Luther's doctrine of the Word has a depth and vitality which became the power of the reformation. By identifying God as God in His Word, faith is not a faith in the Word as Scriptures or as certain beliefs and propositions. Faith is not subject to reason nor dependent on keeping the structures of the church intact. Faith is not threatened by every new point of view or philosophical trend.

Faith which is a direct trust in God is the highest honor which can be given God. There is no higher worship of God than to regard God and His Word as truthful and trustworthy. Likewise, there is no greater contempt for God than to be suspicious of God and regard Him as false. Faith, at its depth, is a trust in God and His Word even

³²Martin Luther, "Psalm 68, 1521," in His Works, XIII, 7. But this calls for faith. For the Father, the Judge, God, is present invisibly. His dwelling is holy; that is, it is set apart and can be seen only with the eyes of faith.

though the whole world and even God Himself should tell us otherwise.

Faith is a personal response to God's Word. As a personal response it depends upon first hearing the Word. Thus, preaching is the primary means used by the Word to be heard; and the ears, Luther calls organs of a Christian man. What is preached are the promises of God. "Where there is no promise there is no faith."³³ When the promises are heard the personal response is a rejoicing and a faith which grounds life on God and His promises. This faith is faith in Christ and it is through Christ that God's promises are most clearly seen.

Christ ought to be preached to the end that faith in him may be established that he may not only be Christ, but be Christ for you and me, and that what is said of him and is denoted in his name may be effectual in us. Such faith is produced and preserved in us by preaching why Christ came, what he brought and bestowed, what benefit it is to us to accept him.³⁴

³³Martin Luther, "A Treatise on the New Testament, 1520," in His Works, XXXV, 92.

³⁴Martin Luther, "Freedom of a Christian, 1520," in Martin Luther, Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings, p. 66; Regin Prenter, "The Living Word," in More About Luther (Decorah: Luther College Press, 1958), p. 71. When Luther speaks of justifying faith, he always thinks of this "Christ faith" . . . which means the faith the believer has in the Christ of history and at the same time the faith which the Christ of history imparts to him. The Christian believes in the Christ of history through the preached Word. And the Christ of history works faith in him through that same preached Word.' Luther, "Lectures on Galatians, 1535," XXVI, 126. Your salvation does not come by works; but God has sent His only Son into the world that we might live through Him.; Luther, "Sermons, 1510-1546," LI, 92

Although faith is a personal response to God's Word, it is not the result of human exertion. Luther insists that a distinction must be made between self-made faith and divine faith. Self-made faith he calls a human notion or dream. This self-made faith results when the gospel is heard and people by their own will and power say to themselves, "I believe." However, such a faith is not faith at all because it is a human idea and does not reach the depths of the heart. Such a faith brings no trust in God or improvement in life so people reason that faith is not enough and set about to do more works.³⁵

True faith is a divine work and changes us from within. "It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different men, in heart and spirit and mind and powers."³⁶ Faith is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit that speaks God's Word to the heart; for the heart by itself cannot comprehend God or His Word unless the

Faith is a firm trust in that Christ, the Son of God, stands in our place and has taken all our sins upon his shoulders and that he is the eternal satisfaction for all our sins and reconciles us with the father.' Luther, "Freedom of a Christian, 1520," p. 60. Faith unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united to her bride-groom . . . so the soul receives the benefits of Christ, i.e., grace, life and salvation and the soul's sins, death and damnation become Christ's.

³⁵Martin Luther, "Preface to Romans, 1546," in His Works, XXXV, 370.

³⁶Ibid.

understanding is received immediately from the Holy Spirit. But when the Spirit speaks the Word to the heart, faith becomes an unshakable experience and feeling. If one does not have this feeling and experience, he has not yet tasted of God's Word.³⁷ Yet, when the experience of faith has happened, a person is absolutely certain of his feeling and " . . . faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times."³⁸

The experience of faith is salvation and the beginning of eternal life. When God's promises have been received into the heart and have been accepted "for me," then one has passed from the old life into the new. Present life is lived in a new relationship to God, which in turn gives a whole new perspective on one's existence. Even though we continue to live in the midst of this earthly life, eternal life has begun. We already participate in the eternal fullness of salvation.

This faith which clings to the Word of God is a lonely experience. Everyone must believe for himself and be convinced in his heart that the Word is true.³⁹ This is

³⁷Martin Luther, "Receiving Both Kinds in the Sacrament, 1522," in His Works, XXXVI, 248.

³⁸Luther, "Preface to Romans, 1546," XXXV, 371.

³⁹Luther, "The Pagan Servitude of the Church, 1520," p. 283.

the case in times of persecution and especially in times of death. No one else can live or die in our place. If in times of trial we look to someone else, we have already lost faith in the Word. It is in the very depths of aloneness that true faith holds to the Word in the face of attacks against the Word, persecution, and death.

CHAPTER VI

AN ANALYSIS OF ONE OF LUTHER'S SERMONS USING CONTEMPORARY METHODS OF SPEECH CRITICISM

The sermon which serves as the basis for this analysis was preached at Weimar on October 19, 1522. The selection of any one particular sermon brings with it a number of liabilities as well as assets. I selected this particular sermon for two major reasons. First, it is an example of some of Luther's best preaching; and second, in the judgment of Julius Kostlin, this is a careful transcript. The liabilities are, first, since this is an example of Luther's best preaching it automatically excludes his mediocre and worst preaching. The second major liability is the lack of information about the congregation and historical situation at Weimar. There is another limitation which makes such a study of Luther difficult. Namely, I could not read the sermon in German. The only saving grace is that Luther is a substantial enough preacher and theologian that he is worthy of such a study and that a considerable amount of materials, both from Luther and about Luther, are available in English.

Before we get to the actual evaluation of the sermon, I am going to include for your reference, the outline I used to evaluate the sermon and the sermon itself.

An Outline for Sermon Evaluation

- I. The Occasion
 - A. Broad historical background
 - B. Immediate historical setting
- II. The Preacher
 - A. Personal background
 - B. Preaching
 1. Contemporary status of preaching
 2. Development as a preacher
 3. Reputation as a preacher
 4. Preaching style
 5. Authority of the text
 6. Sermons
- III. The Congregation
 - A. Historical background
 - B. Make-up of congregation
 - C. Relation to the preacher
- IV. Evaluation of the Sermon
 - A. Structure
 1. Basic outline
 - a) Proportion of the parts
 - b) Movement of the parts
 - c) Unity of the parts
 2. Articulation of the parts
 - a) Development of the parts
 - b) Unity within the parts
 - B. Content of material
 1. Theological orientation
 - a) Exegesis of Scripture
 - b) Content of the sermon
 - c) Theological stance
 - d) Christology
 - e) Paradoxical tension
 - f) Communication of grace
 - g) Enhancement of relationship between God and man
 2. Central thrust
 - a) The one central unifying point of the sermon - the essential message
 - b) Development of the central thrust
 3. Argument
 - a) Logical
 - (1) Reasoning
 - (a) Consistency
 - (b) Completeness

- (c) Consecutiveness
 - (d) Cogency
 - (2) Definitions
 - (a) Clarity
 - (b) Intelligibility
 - (3) Examples
 - (a) Illustration
 - (b) Appropriateness
 - (c) Number
- b) Emotional
 - (1) Adaptation to congregation
 - (2) Consistent with the central theme
 - (3) Appeals to the congregation
- c) Ethical
 - (1) Authority of the speaker
 - (2) Authority appealed to
 - (3) Use of materials
- 4. Richness of materials
 - a) Background of knowledge
 - b) Use of grammatical forms, illustrations, analogies, parallel forms, examples, word choice, etc.
- C. Type
 - 1. Deliberative - present fact and policy - value judgment
 - 2. Forensic - legal, past fact
 - 3. Epitaphic - ceremonial
 - 4. Didactic - teaching
 - 5. Reinforcement - appeal to feelings
- D. Purpose
 - 1. To inform
 - 2. To persuade
 - 3. To motivate
 - 4. To entertain
- E. Style
 - 1. Vocabulary and word choice
 - 2. Composition of sentences
 - 3. Paragraph structure
 - 4. Imagery
 - 5. Ornamentation
- F. Delivery
 - 1. Voice
 - 2. Gestures
 - 3. Physical stance
- G. Effects
 - 1. Immediate
 - 2. Long term
- H. Memory

SERMONS

**The First Sermon, Matt. 22:37-39, the Morning
of October 19, 1522**

The First Sermon Preached by Doctor Martin Luther at the Castle
in Weimar on the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost,¹
October 19, 1522

The Gospel is written in Matthew 22 [:37-39],² "You shall love . . . God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind . . . and your neighbor as yourself, etc."

And the Gospel consists in two questions. First, what is the greatest commandment, by which one is saved, and second, what the law requires; and these two must agree with each other. And he who wants to be a Christian must know this, and this the unbeliever cannot understand and know, because he is blind and hardened. This is also the reason, believe me and understand this, why he is blind and has no understanding of the divine Word; and these are the ones who want to be considered wise, and yet they are obstinate fools.

Now we shall show what Christ here requires of us, and what the commandment is, and which is the greatest.

It is the law and commandment of Christ that one must love him with the whole soul, the whole mind, and all powers, and the neighbor as one's self; and he who has this has everything and God dwells in him; this is certain. But you may say: Oh, it is utterly impossible for a person to keep these two commandments. Yes, it is impossible for you to keep or perform them. You cannot do it; God must do it in you, for him it is possible. Now we shall see what the law requires.

The law requires that we love God with all our powers, etc., and our neighbor as ourselves. Now, if it is true that the law requires that we love God and our neighbor with all our soul and all

¹ I.e., Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity, forenoon.

² The liturgical Gospel for this Sunday is Matt. 22:34-46.

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our powers, then it is certainly true that a person is not rightly fasting, praying, crying to God, and doing other things, if he does not first love God and his neighbor. If the works are not done out of love, then they are absolutely nothing; then there is nothing good in this love, and the outward works are performed and put on in order that the person may prove that he loves God or his neighbor and that in all these things he is devoting himself to them.

Thus circumcision among the Jews was a commandment commanded by God. It was a foolish commandment and to Christ it was not at all an acceptable commandment and it was nothing in the sight of God; they were obliged to do it only in order to show that they loved God. But then it is a shameful, disgraceful, and ridiculous commandment in the sight of God and of men, and among us it would be a disgrace and a shame to keep it and especially here. Therefore all works must be performed out of love, and where there is a heart that loves God, there all works are good. What good would circumcision do me as far as salvation is concerned? But if God were to command it, even the most shameful thing, then I should do it gladly on account of love for him.

This we can see in the case of Abraham, who sacrificed his son because this is what God wanted [Gen. 22:1-19]. According to nature and also in other respects, it was a foolish, stupid command; but Abraham was willing to follow God, and because of the love he bore for God, it was pleasing to God. If he had been able to kill his son a hundred times for the love of God, he would have done it. But God does not care about his killing, about his wanting to sacrifice his only son to him; he was looking at his love and obedience. Thus, when the children of Israel came into the promised land, they gave praise to Abraham, and they too sacrificed their children in great heaps [Ps. 106:37-38]. If someone had said to them: God doesn't care about that, they would not have believed it. God had no use for it whatsoever because they did not do it out of love; and afterwards the prophets preached mightily against it, even giving up their lives over it, for God would not have it. No, he wanted the love which Abraham had, for Christ says: Your circumcising and killing is nothing to me; it is not pleasing to me, for you serve me by loving me and not otherwise. Therefore, for love of him, we should do even the most contemptible works commanded us by God, and on

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this law depend all the commandments. And those commandments which do not come through and out of love are to be broken and they should be left undone, for when God does not find love in a person, he has no desire for his works either.

Thus we find in the old law that when God led the children of Israel out of Egypt through Moses, he did not command circumcision at that time at all; nor had they had it before, and yet it was not displeasing to God, for he was indifferent to it. But when they came into the wilderness he did command them to do this [Gen. 17:10], for in the beginning they loved him exceedingly and therefore he gave them circumcision and other commandments in order that they might show that they loved him, and having love, all works were pleasing to him and in good use. Therefore, as we said before, all works must issue from love; otherwise they are nothing.

Thus we read that as the disciples of Christ were going through the grainfields they plucked ears of grain and ate them [Matt. 12: 1-8]. The Jews were angry over this, but Christ said: Your sabbath is no commandment to me; I don't care about that. The point is that his disciples were hungry and, having loved Christ and followed him, they preferred to break the sabbath rather than leave him. The Jews did not see the love. So one should break all the other commandments for the sake of love to God and one's neighbor. David also did this. When he came to the priest, being hungry, he demanded bread, and the priest said: We have only holy bread which the priests eat [I Sam. 21:1-6]; David took it and ate it and paid no regard to the commandment of the Jews. Therefore, in that same Gospel Christ says to the Pharisees: Have you not read what David did? The devout David was hungry, destitute, and poor [Matt. 12:3], and they had to give it to him and honor him.

Thus, all the commandments of the law depend on love [Matt. 22:40]. That is to say, if they are not done out of love, they are contrary to God and are nothing; that's what you should go by. It is not to be done for the sake of other works, for your eye should be kept only on the work of love, and you should break all the laws rather than see your brother suffer want or affliction. For Christ imputes everything to love and our whole life should consist in this. And if you could save a soul with a mass and you see your brother suffering want, you should help him and let the other go; there is

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therein, I should break free from the order and help my neighbor. God doesn't want any works without love. Let this be your guide. Therefore the monk's life is all wicked, for it does not help the neighbor and it is just because of this commandment of the pope that many of you know so little of what Christ and his Word is. And the same people know neither the smallest nor the greatest commandment of Christ. Therefore, the more spiritual and hypocritical, the more blind they are. And yet the spirituals boast that they are the most devout of all; there is no faith in them and they have no understanding of Scripture at all, and yet we must pay them great honor. They should remember, however, that what people do to them, they should do also to them. Thus they have been so led astray by human laws that not one of them patiently follows Christ. If one is struck by another, he will not forgive him. This is simply impossible. Christ teaches us to do things that are impossible, but God effects them in us. Therefore, let each one of us look into his heart and remember the love which is able to do this.

Now, what is meant by "with all your heart"? Nothing else but that I do willingly and gladly everything that my God commands me. This I do not accomplish, however long I pray the rosary and other prayers in a secret place. Now one who loves with his whole heart always says: O God, as thou wilt, so I will; should I die, live, be poor, should I be sick, saved, or condemned, I shall do so gladly with all my will; it is thy will; lead me, therefore, through all shame. That person loves with his whole heart.

Then, loving with one's "whole soul." This is to love with one's whole, inmost heart, spirit, and one's whole life. Where do you find that kind of a person? Man, whether he hears, sees, wakes, sleeps, walks, or stands still, wants always to live his life without being bothered at all. That person who loves best is the person who loves with his whole soul.

And then, to go on, loving "with all your mind." This is to surrender oneself to God with one's whole mind, so that even his commands become good and right. But in these days our minds have been utterly corrupted by man-made laws, for the evil spirit usually concentrates on seizing the human mind and spirit, and this is the blindness in which our spirituals are living and they have been leading us in it for a long time.

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no other way out.

But isn't it a pitiful thing? A priest has a commandment, not from God, but from the pope, such as praying the seven hours,³ fasting the long fasts, doing this and doing that. He attaches more importance to fulfilling obedience to the pope than he does to doing this for the love of Christ; he would rather let his neighbor suffer hunger and want. Here is a lay person who is commanded as a penance to go to Rome, make a pilgrimage to this or that saint; he is to go barefoot and do a lot of other things. Now when he sees his neighbor suffering want, with wife and child, and the poor man asks him for help, he should look to the love of Christ, help him, and let the pilgrimage go. For love of one's neighbor is like the first commandment. Therefore a priest should let his "hours" go and help his neighbor; he should interrupt the outward work, which is of no consequence to God, and say quite freely: This I should let lie and help my neighbor; this is what God commanded me, the other is the pope's, and now I shall follow God's commandment and let the other go. This would be a real Christian and priest.

But nowadays when a pilgrimage is imposed upon a person and his brother and neighbor asks him to help him, he goes to confession and receives the penance that he should help his neighbor and that he is unable to perform the pope's commandment. Thus he has more regard for the pope's commandment than for Christ's.

This is what the preachers accomplish! Oh, we have had blind preachers for a long time; they have been totally blind themselves and leaders of the blind, as the gospel says; they have left the gospel and followed their own ideas and preferred the work of men to the work of God [cf. Mark 7:8-9]. Oh, how well we have done, how interested God is in this! So say the seducers and shameful scoundrels. Therefore we have left Christ and followed our own opinions. God has commanded us to love him and our neighbor, but we have esteemed outward work more than love. It is just as if a master said to his servant: Go and plow for me; and he went and washed the pails, and then sulks against his master as if he needed a box on the ears.

Thus all our works should be done in love. So, even if I am a Carthusian or a monk and find that I am not helping my neighbor

³ Latin, *septem horas*.

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This, then, is the love which Christ would have. And here we find that we are all under condemnation; no one does or has this love. When this law is kept, one needs no other law. To the Jews a ridiculous, trifling commandment was given, that of wearing tassels and borders on their garments [Num. 15:38-39]. God cares nothing about this; for as we have said, unless one wears them for love of him, it does not help them at all. Hence, a person, confronted with this love, must feel his inability and powerlessness to perform the least letter of the law and know that he can do nothing good. Now this knowledge does not come through works; nor do these contribute to our salvation, as Paul shows that salvation does not come through works or issue from works [Rom. 3:20]. You cannot have this knowledge through your own nature, for your nature is so blind that it does not know what Christ and his law is, nor does it know how deeply it lies in sin. Therefore Luke, who also records this Gospel, says that the Jews said to Christ that the commandment of love was right [Luke 20:39; cf. Luke 10:28, Mark 12:32]. But they would not accept it; they were too blind.

Therefore we conclude, by the authority of this Gospel, that monks, nuns, and priests have all been led and turned to blind, outward works, and there they are stuck, though we can accomplish nothing through them. For anyone who does not do his work out of love is blind. So it was also with the Jews and the Pharisees; though they were fine persons and honest men, they nevertheless were blind. So we accomplish nothing whatsoever by outward works. To be a monk, nun, a Carthusian, to go to Rome or to St. James,⁴ all this is nothing. He who does not acknowledge his sinfulness, like the Pharisees and Jews, is condemned. Christ came down from heaven to make himself known to us. He stepped down into our mire and became a man. But we do not know him, nor do we accept him, who came to help us out of every need and fear. But he who accepts Christ, acknowledges and loves him, he fulfils all things and all his works are good; he does good to his neighbor; he suffers all things for God's sake.

Therefore, this is what the law requires and says: You owe nothing except to love Christ and your neighbor; otherwise you are eternally condemned. But then afterwards Christ comes and says:

⁴St. James of Compostella, a place of pilgrimage in Spain.

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I suffered, died, and rose again in order that I might fill you with the riches and grace of my Holy Spirit and thus strengthen you. So if you have the Spirit, then you are not an outward spirit; no, you have salvation. Then a person thinks this way: Now, Lord Jesus, I will serve you, die and live for you, and patiently suffer all that is disagreeable from you and from men; do with me as you will. That person will be washed of his sins by the blood of Christ.

Hence, if I have the Holy Spirit, I have faith, by which I cling to God. And if I believe in God, then I also have his love and I love God, foe, and friend. That is why Paul says: I can do all things through the Spirit of God [Phil. 4:13]. The Spirit does not come through fasting, praying, pilgrimages, running to and fro around the country; no, only through faith. So Christ bestows his gifts upon you without any merit whatsoever and what he did for him [i.e., Paul], he does for you also. Here, of course, you must guard against thinking that you are capable of faith; God must give it to you.

Therefore, this is what we say about the law; this is what it is and nothing else: The law kills; your God saves you. And he who does not believe is condemned. In short: Help us, O God, to this faith. Amen. Therefore, guard yourselves against the fool preachers who say: Yes, good works will do it. No, first faith must be present in a man. So he who does not follow Christ and also does not love him is condemned.

As for us, we shall call upon God. Amen.

¹Martin Luther, "Sermons, 1510-1546," in Luther's Works, LI, 104-10.

I. THE OCCASION

A. Broad Historical Background

The year 1522 stands in the context of several centuries of attempts to reform the abuses of the Catholic Church. The church had exploited the people which had left them poor and destitute and made the clergy rich and corrupt. The corruption of the church was common knowledge and distasteful to nearly everyone. However, the Catholic Church was so all-pervasive and ruthless that it was able to keep the people in humble submission for the salvation of their souls. Attempts at reformation had either been ineffective or suppressed. But the dawning of the sixteenth century was the dawning of a new age. In 1492, when Luther was five years old, Columbus discovered America. Travel, commerce, science and the rising of a middle class had awakened the human spirit. Increasing numbers of people were beginning to demand a part in the governing of their own lives.

It is interesting to note some of the events that took place in Luther's life in October in the years prior to the preaching of this sermon on October 19, 1522. It was in October, 1508, fourteen years earlier that Luther was first called from Erfurt to teach in Wittenberg. Just ten years prior, on October 19, 1512, he received his Doctor of Theology Degree. In the same month, he was

appointed to the Biblical chair in Wittenberg. On October 31, 1517, five years earlier, he posted his ninety-five Theses on the church door.

During these five years, from October 31, 1517 to October 19, 1522, Luther had clearly become the leader of an effective reformation. He was, even before 1522, something of a national hero, known by everyone and respected by large masses of people from all levels of society. He was a sought after teacher, a popular preacher and most important, he was a voluminous writer whose ideas were published as fast as he could write them. Just two years earlier, in 1520, three of Luther's most substantial publications were printed. They were, "The Address to the German Nobility," "Babylonian Captivity," and "On the Freedom of the Christian Man." Luther's writings were the popular reading materials of the time and every article had an immediate market. His ideas were the subject of table conversation from the poorest to the richest.

By the latter part of 1521, the reformation movement was firmly established. Heinrich Boehmer concludes his book, Road to Reformation at 1521 with these statements:

From this point onward Luther's own life story can only be told in connection with the development of the evangelical movement When the gates of Wartburg closed behind him they marked the end of the first epoch, a decisive turning point in his career.

It may be said that his period of youth was definitely closed.²

B. Immediate Historical Setting

So little is known specifically about Weimar on October 19, 1522 that the immediate historical setting can best be seen in the context of the period May 4, 1521 to October 19, 1522.

After the Diet of Worms, Luther's ideas and the Catholic Church met head on as some of Luther's followers put into practice the implications of his preaching. Erfurt, where Luther had spent his earlier years as a student at the University and as a monk in the Augustinian Cloister, was the first scene of what could be called revolutionary disturbances. In June of 1521, Luther's friend, Johannes Lange, an Augustinian monk, had stirred the townspeople to a vicious hatred against the Roman Church and its clergy. Violence erupted and the town council, which supported Lange, used the mobs of people for their attacks on the privileges and property of the clergy. In a few days armed bands of students, peasants and others had destroyed considerable church property including parsonages, libraries and articles of worship. The violence became so uncontrollable that even a number of

²Heinrich Boehmer, Road to Reformation (New York: Dial Press, 1930), p. 538.

the priests were murdered including Maternus Pictoris who was highly esteemed by the University for his services to the humanist cause.

After these events, the University of Erfurt experienced a rapid decline. Parents took their children out of the school to save them from the heresy. For those who remained, Janssen writes, " . . . riots and excesses of all sorts became the order of the day."³

However, in spite of the turmoil and destruction, the Roman Church remained intact in Erfurt. There still was, as of the summer of 1521, no idea of organizing a new church system. However, Janssen concludes:

Such a contingency, [a new church organization] could not but follow eventually as the result of Luther's teaching of justification by faith alone, and of universal priesthood. If all Christians were priests before God, there was no need of any hierarchical system; if good works were not necessary to salvation, ecclesiastical institutions and cloisters became superfluities, and all the worldly goods of the Church were equally useless. This evangelical liberty, thus ostentatiously proclaimed, required the removal of all such offensive anomalies, and inflamed multitudes with eagerness to escape from the crushing slavery of cowl and cloister, prayers, fasts, and mortification, and filled them with desire to obtain a share 'in the rich possessions of lazy priests' and the splended church treasures of gold and silver chains, monstrants and so forth.⁴

³J. Janssen, History of the German People (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1910), III, 246.

⁴Ibid., IV, 246-7.

Later, in the fall of 1521, one year prior to the preaching of this sermon, the final upheavals began in Erfurt. The revolutionary party became the most powerful. Those who were once influential and maintained their ties with the Roman Church lost their influence and feared for their lives.

Monks marched mutinously from the cloisters, especially the Augustinians. They preached that the Roman Church was nothing but the mother of human dogma, pride, luxury and faithlessness. They preached most fiercely against the tyranny of the papacy and declared that fasts, prayers, confession and absolution, monkhood and masses were only human institutions. The church and theology were conversation issues of the day and these questions were debated in the homes, market places, and taverns by men, women and children expounding the Bible. Luther's books were read openly in defiance of the imperial edict. Pamphlets and other materials denouncing the Roman Church were in abundant supply and read enthusiastically while orthodox materials about the church were without demand.

The lenience, uncertain attitude and in some cases support by the official church dignitaries did much to develop the revolutionary character of the movement. The Archbishop of Mayence, Primate of Germany, gave Luther his support and protection and in his dioceses did everything in his power to hinder public proceedings against him.

These events at Erfurt would no doubt have some impact upon its neighboring town, Weimar, though the reforming activity was probably not of such a violent and comprehensive nature.

Also, in the fall of 1521, Wittenberg followed Erfurt's lead in bringing about change. However, the changes in Wittenberg were even more influential in the long run because they primarily focused on the worship service itself. So far, the Catholic Church and its worship remained pretty much intact even though its property and priests were violently attacked. Melanchthon lead the way to liturgical reform on September 29, 1521 when, " . . . he and his pupils received the Sacrament in the Parish Church, the words of institution being spoken aloud and the cup being passed to the laity."⁵

Knowing Luther approved of such liturgical reforms, a few days later Gabriel Zwilling and other Augustinians took active steps against the Mass as a sacrifice. They argued that the adoration of the Eucharist was idolatrous, that the Body and Blood of Christ were not a sacrifice, but only a sign of the forgiveness of sins. They told their students that no one should any longer attend the service of Mass and they introduced a new order of Divine Worship.

⁵Hartman Grisar, Luther (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1913), I, 98.

Carlstadt also advocated that the Mass should be abolished. Melanchthon supported Carlstadt, reasoning that if St. Paul had entirely abolished circumcision among the Corinthians, why should not the Mass be abolished? Carlstadt thought that time should be allowed to bring about the abolition, but Melanchthon answered, "Enough has been preached about it here in Capernaum; what do you mean by clinging thus to ceremonies?"⁶ In the Christmas service on December 24, 1521, Carlstadt omitted the canon of the Mass, the elevation of the host and distributed both wine and the bread to a large congregation. He also announced that he would lay aside the priestly dress and other ceremonies. Two days later, on December 26th, he announced his engagement to the fifteen year old daughter of a poor nobleman. He was married on January 20, 1522 in the presence of distinguished professors of the University. Although Carlstadt was not the first to break the vow of celibacy, his act received the most notoriety and lead the way to a married priesthood.

From this point on, Carlstadt became one of the most daring of Luther's followers. He declared that images were an abomination and should be destroyed, arranged all sorts of arbitrary changes in religious worship, denounced

⁶Janssen, op. cit., III, 253.

confession as a devilish device of papal tyranny, and maintained that no priest without wife and children should receive an appointment. He assailed the fasts and encouraged people to eat meat and eggs on fast days, reputed all titles and dignities and expressed contempt for all theology and human learning. In brief, Carlstadt introduced a new legalism in place of the old. In January of 1522, a noisy group lead by Carlstadt forced its way into the Wittenberg Church destroying altars and saints and cast them along with the clergy into the street.

In addition to the reforming ideas and practices of Carlstadt and Zwilling, on December 27, 1521, three of the Zwickau prophets arrived in Wittenberg to proclaim their gospel. This group, founded by Thomas Munzer declared that they were going to establish a new kingdom of Christ. Their ideas were even more revolutionary than those of Carlstadt and Zwilling.

In this new kingdom there was to be no outward form of worship, no outward fabric of law and no secular authority; all men were to be equal, all property held in common; all were to be priests and kings alike.⁷

Although they used Holy Scripture as their source of enlightenment, only that which was explicitly commanded was to be followed. Thus, for example, infant baptism was to be abolished. Also, great emphasis was placed on the Holy

⁷Ibid., III, 255.

Spirit as a revealer of truth and commandments in visions. These prophets of Zwickau made a deep impression on Melanchthon.

Thus, all in all, Wittenberg and especially Luther's old parish was in a desperate state of turmoil. Luther's ideas about the gospel were now as threatened by reformers as they were threatened earlier by the Pope. Being well informed of the events at Wittenberg and elsewhere, Luther realized that he must leave Wartburg to restore order and save the gospel.

Although there is a great deal of material concerning Luther's seclusion at Wartburg, three events stand out as particularly important to the historical situation. First is the development of the reformation movement. Prior to the Diet of Worms, the main leadership and opposition to Rome was simply Luther himself. In Luther's absence, the movement matured. The leadership became more broad based as a number of clergy who supported Luther now exercised their leadership in their churches and communities. Instead of just Luther, the avant-garde leadership was now taken up by Lange, Carlstadt, Zwilling and Melanchthon. The people were aroused to the point of rioting. They had been suppressed from every direction. This new gospel of individual freedom provided the rationale they needed to put their feelings of hostility

into action, first against the church and later in the Peasant's War, against the Princes.

Secondly, Wartburg provided Luther the time needed to translate the New Testament into German. If the people were to know the Word of God, it was important that they be able to read and study it themselves. Although this translation was not completed and printed until September of 1522, most of the work had been done before he left Wartburg. This translation had a significant impact on the progress of the reformation and has been hailed by some scholars as Luther's greatest accomplishment. In all probability, some members of the congregation at Weimar had received copies of this new translation a week or two before hearing this sermon.

The third importance of Wartburg is what it did to Luther personally. At the Diet of Worms, Luther was a young rebel ready to take on the world for conscience sake. He was a radical reformer in that he sought an overthrow of church organization as it then existed without really offering anything of substance to take its place except the gospel. He was not willing to compromise.

Wartburg gave Luther time to cool off and an opportunity to observe the implications of his own position being put into action in Erfurt and Wittenberg.

Upon leaving Wartburg, Luther acknowledged that moderation was in order and when he left Wartburg his focus

was to restore order and unity and bring about reform by a more acceptable, non-violent means. It is in this kind of frame of mind that Luther preached this sermon at Weimar on October 19, 1522. The moderate approach of this sermon and its focus on love were probably the major emphases of most of the sermons he preached from March to October.

Luther left Wartburg on March 1 and arrived in Wittenberg on March 6, 1522. His reasons for returning to Wittenberg at that particular time against the wishes of the Elector Frederick were threefold: (1) the church had written him an urgent request to come, (2) confusion in his flock, i.e., the people of Wittenberg; and (3) threats of an imminent outbreak.

On Sunday, March 9, 1522, Luther ascended his old pulpit to preach to his congregation and the citizens and students of Wittenberg. Of this occasion in history and regarding these sermons, Schaff writes:

Protestantism had reached a very critical juncture. Luther or Carlstadt, reformation or revolution, the written Word or illusive inspirations, order or confusion: that was the question. Luther was in the highest and best mood, full of faith in his cause, and also full of charity for his opponents, strong in matter, sweet in manner, and completely successful. He never showed such moderation and forbearance before or after.

He preached eight sermons for eight days in succession, and carried the audience with him. They are models of effective popular eloquence, and among the best he ever preached. He handled the subject from the stand-point of a pastor, with fine tact and practical wisdom. He kept aloof from coarse personalities which disfigure so many of his polemical writings.

Not one unkind word, not one unpleasant allusion, escaped his lips. In plain, clear, strong, scriptural language, he refuted the errors without naming the errorists. The positive statement of the truth in love is the best refutation of error.

The ruling ideas of these eight discourses are: Christian freedom and Christian charity; freedom from the tyranny of radicalism which would force the conscience against forms, as the tyranny of popery forces the conscience in the opposite direction; charity towards the weak, who must be trained like children, and tenderly dealt with, lest they stumble and fall. Faith is worthless without charity. No man has a right to compel his brother in matters that are left free; and among these are marriage, living in convents, private confession, fasting and eating, images in churches. Abuses which contradict the word of God, as private masses, should be abolished, but in an orderly manner by proper authority. The Word of God and moral suasion must be allowed to do the work. Paul preached against the idols in Athens, without touching one of them; and yet they fell in consequence of his preaching.⁸

As a result of these sermons and Luther's presence, order and stability were restored to Wittenberg. Most of the old forms of worship were reinstalled for a while until the people were ready for a change. Luther himself returned to the convent, resumed the cowl and observed the fasts. However, the passage about the Mass as a sacrifice was omitted from the worship service and communion in both kinds prevailed. Zwilling acknowledged his errors and agreed with Luther and continued to be one of the most respected Lutheran preachers. Carlstadt submitted sullenly and after some time left Wittenberg and tried to preach

⁸Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1888), VI, 388.

elsewhere but was ultimately a broken man and never substantially succeeded in establishing his ideas.

The seven months between Luther's preaching the eight sermons at Wittenberg and this sermon preached at Weimar on October 19, 1522 were busy ones. The two things that concerned Luther most that summer were: the completion of his translation of the New Testament and providing leadership and unity to the now developing evangelical congregations.

By studying a few of his letters, we can get a grasp of his own personal involvement and his immediate personal history which he brings to this sermon.

March 18, 1522 - to Nicolas Gerbel, a lawyer friend in Strassburg: Luther writes him of the dangers he faced in returning to Wittenberg.

For Satan rages as well as those about me, and threatens me with death and hell and tries to destroy my flock. Therefore I cast myself alive amidst the fury of the Emperor and Pope to try to drive the wolf from the fold, and my only protection is from above, while I dwell among my enemies, who can destroy me any hour.⁹

March 28, 1522 - to John Lange, the Augustinian who lead the revolt at Erfurt: He mildly disagrees with Lange's reasons for leaving the cloister and what happened at Erfurt. He promises to write the Church at Erfurt

⁹Martin Luther, The Letters of Martin Luther (London: Macmillan, 1908), p. 101.

though commends them on their knowledge of the Word. However, he feels that at Erfurt Christian love is not visible because the hearts are cold. This is one of the first hints we have of Luther's dissatisfaction with the way things are going at Erfurt. Next is a very revealing statement about his situation in Saxony.

I cannot come to you, for it is not right to tempt God by needlessly running into danger, especially as I have enough here; being attacked through the Papal and Imperial Edict, and enjoy as much freedom as the birds of the air, whose only protection is God Almighty.¹⁰

March 30, 1522 - to George Spalatin, the court preacher of Elector Frederick: The main point of this letter to Spalatin was to get the names of the precious stones mentioned in Revelations 21 and to ask that examples of these stones might be loaned to Luther so he could see what they were like. This was for the purpose of his translation of the New Testament.¹¹

April 14, 1522 - letter to Spalatin: Many of Luther's letters to Spalatin were for the purpose of theological discussions. In addition to being the kind of thing Luther would do with a good friend, it probably also served the purpose of helping Spalatin clarify to the Elector Frederick Luther's position.¹²

¹⁰Ibid., p. 102.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., p. 103.

April 17, 1522 - letter to the Burghermaster and Town Council at Alterberg: Many cities and communities wrote Luther requesting that he send them a pastor that they might hear the Word of God. Luther had received such a letter from Alterberg and in this letter suggests that they accept Gabriel Zwilling as their preacher. He tells them that he is a little different from most preachers, but he is nevertheless an excellent preacher. If, however, after they interview Zwilling they do not want him, Luther will send them one of two capable secular priests that he has with him in Wittenberg.

The same day he wrote Gabriel Zwilling advising him of his recommendation to Alterberg and pleaded with him to accept the call. Then he gives a little pastoral advice:

Go thither in peace, and may you be a blessing to many thousands. But see that you behave in a circumspect manner, going about in an orderly priest's dress; and for the sake of the weak, do away with that broad angular monstrosity of a hat, remembering that you are sent to those who must still be fed with milk--till they are freed from the meshes of the Pope.¹³

July 4, 1522 - letter to Wenzel Link: Luther writes Link to encourage him to join himself. Luther tells him that he is needed so he can enlist him in the Lord's service and that he needs his advice on matters concerning the faith. It appears from this letter that Luther seeks

¹³Ibid., p. 105.

to recruit his clergy friends still serving in the Catholic Church to accept a congregation seeking evangelical pastors.¹⁴

July 4, 1522 - letter to Spalatin: He comments on the King of England referring to him as a growling lion, discusses the celibate priesthood and seeks to have Spalatin set Philip Melanchthon free from teaching grammar so that he may devote full time to teaching theology.¹⁵

September 25, 1522 - letter to Spalatin: Luther asks him to send a copy of the just completed translation of the New Testament to Duke John, his host while at Wartburg. While at Wartburg, Luther sent Duke John, page by page, his translation of the New Testament so that John might daily read the Scripture. Luther says he is really mad at the printing business and his printer. Comments on correspondence from Wenzel Link. Says he wishes the Prince would attend to his own affairs and let himself handle Satan.¹⁶

October 4, 1522 - letter to Spalatin: Discusses Spalatin's comments on the Kingdom of God and seeks assistance for Johannes Pomeranus who is soon going to marry.¹⁷

¹⁴Ibid., p. 106.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 107.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 108.

¹⁷Ibid.

This is but a brief glimpse at Luther's correspondence from March to October of 1522. It does, however, give us insight to some of Luther's concerns during that time.

In addition to his correspondence, during the course of the summer, Luther did considerable traveling to resolve congregational problems and to establish a unity among the Evangelical Congregations. These travels did not start until April 24, but then included such towns as Lachau, Torgau, Herzburg, Belgern, Borna, Alterberg, Zwickau, Eulenberg, Lichtenberg, Leisnig, Zerbat, Erfurt and Weimar. It was on one of these trips that this sermon was preached at Weimar. In addition to his travels, a large number of people came to Wittenberg to confer with Luther.

Thus, prior to the preaching of this sermon, Luther was deeply involved in translating the New Testament, publishing articles, preaching, corresponding and trying to bring about some organization and unity among those congregations who followed him. Historically, the religious and political institutions were still pretty much in turmoil, but for Those who sought reform in the church, some order, unity and security was emerging as the result of Luther's efforts.

II. The Preacher

A. Personal Background

Martin Luther was born in Eisleben, Germany on November 10, 1483. He was the oldest of seven children born to Hans and Margaretha Luther. Shortly after his birth, the family moved to Mansfield where, after several years of hard labor, Hans became moderately successful as a lessee of several iron pits and furnaces. Hans became respected in the community, and in 1491 was elected to the town council. In later years, Luther speaks of the poverty of his childhood in Mansfield but other evidence indicates that the family did not live in poverty, though neither were they well to do.

There is a great deal of controversy regarding the early years of Luther's life and their psychological impact upon his later religious struggles, theology and actions as a reformer. Such a depth study is beyond the scope of this evaluation. However, to give some idea of Luther's personal background a general survey of historical information will be helpful to understand this sermon.

It is agreed that Luther's parents were strong disciplinarians believing in unquestioned obedience to parental authority. The religious atmosphere of the home was pious; and in keeping with the times, the children were taught the accepted religious ideas and practices. As a

youth, Luther attended church and joined in the liturgy, festivals, processions and pilgrimages. The sermons were primarily of a judgmental character and he comments later that as a boy, the thought of Christ as judge filled him with terror. Also, in common with the age, Luther developed a very realistic belief in the devil, purgatory and hell.

From the age of seven to fourteen years, Luther attended the Mansfield Latin School. Here the discipline was severe and unreasonably harsh. Latin was the basic course of study; and readings included philosophy, religion and ethics.

At the age of fourteen in 1497, Luther went to Magdeburg to continue his education. Here it is believed that he attended the Cathedral School but his teachers were members of the Brethren of the Common Life. Their teachings were highly religious in content and placed an emphasis on the inwardness of religion. To accomplish this, they encouraged reading the Bible in German and the practice of a devout life in keeping with the teaching a spirit of the Scriptures. This is possibly the first time that Luther studied the Scriptures for himself. Magdeburg was also a seat of an archbishopric which means the city was dominated by ecclesiastical interests with its numerous clergy, churches and monasteries. Any young man would be

impressed with the ecclesiastical pomp, stately ceremonies and church services.

After one year at Magdeburg, Hans sent Martin to attend school in Eisenach where the family had many relatives. However, Luther did not live with the relatives but was taken in by a Mrs. Kuntz Cotta who was impressed with his singing and personality. It was at Eisenach that Luther distinguished himself as a student and prepared himself to enter academic study at the University of Erfurt in 1501.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Erfurt was known as "little Rome." It was the seat of a suffragan bishop and at this time had over 100 buildings devoted to religious uses, all in a city of about 20,000. It had numerous monastic orders including the Augustinian Eremites which Luther later joined. Thus, once more Luther found himself in a city dominated by an ecclesiastical environment.

The University of Erfurt, in 1501, was the most respected university in Germany. The curriculum during his eighteen months preparation for the Bachelor of Arts degree included logic, rhetoric, physics, and philosophy. Luther received his B.A. degree in the fall of 1502. Three years later, he received his Master's degree in the winter of 1505 at the age of twenty-two. Again, he had distinguished himself by graduating second in a class of seventeen.

Erfurt was known as an Occamist university and under the tutelage of Trutvetter and Uxingen. Luther became an enthusiastic Occamist in opposition to the Thomists and Scotists. Also, because Aristotle was the cominant philosopher for most universities, Luther came to have a comprehensive knowledge of his philosophy. Later, Luther mentions that it was while he was a young master at Erfurt that he took to reading the Bible in earnest.

Having received his Master of Arts degree, Luther was obligated to teach for two years though he could also continue his studies. At his father's wish, he became a student in the Faculty of Law in May of 1505. However, Luther was simply not interested in the professional and material goals his father had set for him and on July 17, 1505 he entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt.

The background behind Luther's decision to leave law and enter the monastery is one of the popular subjects of speculation and controversy. The incident at which the decision was made is reported as follows: On July second, Luther was returning to Erfurt from Mansfield. Near Erfurt, he was caught in a terrific thunderstorm. A flash of lightning struck him to the ground, and in terror of sudden death, he vowed to become a monk. Once the vow was made, he felt morally and religiously bound to keep it and on July seventeenth, his friends accompanied him to the door of the Augustinian monastery.

The Augustinian monastery was known for its strict observance of the monastic life and for its flourishing theological school. During this novitiate year, Luther carefully followed the prescribed requirements which included personal habits, religious practices, begging and menial chores. Luther was satisfied with this life and described it as a peaceful and God-like life. At the end of his novitiate and after careful investigation, both Luther and his superiors deemed it appropriate that he should continue.

In September 1506, Luther entered a course of theological study for the purpose of becoming an ordained priest and ultimately, a theological professor for the Order. During this course of instruction, he was ordained stage by stage--subdeacon, deacon and priest. Some weeks after his ordination as priest, he celebrated his first Mass on May 2, 1507. In the process of saying the mass, Luther was overwhelmed by his sense of unworthiness before Almighty God and only by fearful restraint was he able to finish the mass. Of this moment, Luther later recalled:

At these words [We offer unto thee, the living, the true, the eternal God] I was utterly stupefied and terror-stricken. I thought to myself, "With what tongue shall I address such Majesty, seeing that all men ought to tremble in the presence of even an earthly prince? Who am I, that I should lift up mine eyes or raise my hands to the divine Majesty?" The angels surround him. At his nod the earth trembles. And shall I, a miserable little pygmy, say 'I want this, I

ask for that?' For I am dust and ashes and full of sin and I am speaking to the living, eternal and the true God.¹⁸

From 1506 to 1512, Luther was a student of theology. From 1506 to October 1508, he was a student at Erfurt where the emphasis was on scholastic theology. In October, 1508, he was transferred from Erfurt to Wittenberg at the request of Staupitz, to continue his theological studies and to lecture on Aristotle's ethics. This move brought him into personal contact with Staupitz who later played a key role in dealing with Luther's spiritual conflicts and in directing him into Biblical studies and preaching. In the fall of 1509, Luther returned to Erfurt to continue his studies. In the fall of 1510, Luther was sent to Rome to handle some business for the monastery. For such a pious and devout Monk as Luther, it was a great privilege to be able to go to "The Holy City." This trip turned out to be a key experience in his development. Much to his surprise and disgust, he found nothing but impiety and wickedness. His personal impressions of Rome stamped themselves deeply on his memory and later are reflected in his inditelements against the Pope.

Shortly after his return to Erfurt, in the spring of 1511, Luther managed to arrange a transfer to the University of Wittenberg where he again was under the

¹⁸Roland H. Bainton, Here I Stand (New York: New American Library, 1963), p. 30.

direction of Staupitz and where he received his Doctor of Theology degree in October of 1512.

These years, from 1506-12, were also years of religious and personal struggle. Luther could not accept that he, such an unholy man, could be a priest and stand in the presence of the All High and All Holy God. Thus, Luther set for himself an energetic pursuit of holiness. He fasted sometimes for three days. He made vigils and prayers in excess of those stipulated. He mortified the flesh and would throw off his blankets until he nearly froze to death. In his own words about this period he writes:

I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading and other work.¹⁹

However, all of this brought no inner assurance but only served to increase Luther's sense of personal sin and unworthiness and his alienation from the All Holy God. Luther's despair spiraled downward and no amount of confession and spiritual counsel from his advisor Staupitz seemed to bring relief. Staupitz was puzzled--what to do with Luther--and finally decided he could best be helped

¹⁹Ibid., p. 34.

by forcing him to help others. Luther was ordered that he should undertake preaching and assume the chair of Bible at the University of Wittenberg.

Luther started his lecture on the Psalms on August 1, 1513. In the fall of 1515, he started his lecture on Romans and in 1516-17, lectured on Galatians. These studies were, for Luther, his road to faith and salvation. His experience of salvation took place on two fronts: first, because Luther was forced to work so hard at so many projects, he did not have the time for the kind of introspection he had been doing. Instead, his attention was focused outward on his work. Secondly, the problem of justification shifted as a result of his study of the Scriptures and especially Romans. Luther had been overwhelmed by how he could make himself just before the All Holy, All Just God. After considerable study and thought about "the just shall live by his faith," (Romans 1:16-17) Luther came to understand that the justice of God is that righteousness, which, by grace and sheer mercy God justifies men through faith. This was, for Luther, the experience of Christian freedom and a new life of faith. This was the great dividing line in Luther's life. From this point he went forth with confidence and strength and emerged as the great reforming power.

From 1512 to 1521, Luther distinguished himself as a Biblical scholar, teacher and preacher. On October 31, 1517, Luther, outraged by Tetzel's sale of indulgences, nailed his ninety-five theses for disputation to the church door. Increasingly, there were more and more serious conflicts with the church authorities which finally lead to the Diet of Worms and the resulting imperial ban on Luther and all his writings. From May 4, 1521 to March 1, 1522, Luther was held in seclusion at Wartburg where he grew a beard, wore a prince's clothes and assumed the name, Prince George.

On March 1, 1522, Luther felt it necessary to leave Wartburg to restore order of what had become a full fledged rebellion. From March 1, 1522 to the preaching of this sermon he worked to restore order and secure unity among the churches seeking reform.

B. Preaching

1. Contemporary status of preaching

To put Luther's preaching in context, it is necessary to look at the status of preaching prior to the sixteenth century. From the seventh to eleventh centuries, preaching was at its lowest ebb. There was little in the way of creativity or religious spirit. Preachers either tried to imitate some of the great preachers of the past or simply copied them by using recorded or prepared sermons.

There was but a feeble use of the vernacular. Sermons dealt largely in fables of saints, made extravagant laudation of Mary, laid more stress on the monastic and churchly than on the real Christian virtues and emphasized the merit of penance and other works. Toward the end of the eleventh century there were new developments in human progress which also found one of its expressions in improved preaching. Preaching continued to gain power through the twelfth century and reached its height in the thirteenth century.

The thirteenth century represents one of the great eras of preaching. The deteriorated remnants of this century carry over as the general style to the early sixteenth century. In the thirteenth century, there were three major developments in preaching: the scholastic, the popular and the mystical.

Scholastic preaching was an attempt to reach ultimate truth by reasoning from divinely revealed doctrines and from ecclesiastically authorized dogmas. It was the application of Aristotelian logic to the interpretation of Scripture and theology.

Scholasticism made an enduring contribution to preaching in that sermons since have been a more orderly and logical address. The scholastic sermon centered more on speculation than Scripture. Its emphasis on minute detail and theoretical issues often bypassed the

understanding of the congregation. However, the scholastic sermon was a great improvement over the dark ages and established again preaching as a respectable task. Its best known representative was Thomas Aquinas.

Popular preaching was the most distinctive and emphatic preaching in the early thirteenth century. "Vast crowds, popular enthusiasm, some fanaticism and extremes, but likewise conversion to God and amendment of life were some of its features and fruits."²⁰ One of the reasons for the development of popular preaching was the rise of a middle class who had some political power and who were demanding a hearing of the gospel. The second was the efforts of the Catholic Church to meet a twofold situation. To combat heresy, Dominic learned that the Catholic faith could better be spread by preaching than by persecutions or churchly teaching. Francis, on the other hand, saw the neglected spiritual plight of the people and dedicated his life to preaching the gospel to the poor. From these two men developed the two great preaching orders of monks who were the great popular preachers of the century.

The popular sermons were designed to speak to the people in a way that was understandable. They were preached in the vernacular and used vivid allegory, lively

²⁰Edwin C. Dargan, A History of Preaching (New York: Armstrong, 1905), p. 242.

dialogue and illustrations that appealed to the imaginations. These preachers were sensitive to human nature, and were masters at handling great crowds. In addition to the embellishments, these preachers presented Christ as Savior and appealed to the congregation to practice the Christian virtues as evidence of a real Christian experience.

Mysticism has had an impact on preaching of nearly every age, but it rose to its apex in the mid-thirteenth century in the person of John Tauler. The basic characteristic doctrine of mysticism was the doctrine of the union of the soul with God. It strives for an immediate experience and vision of the Divine. To do this requires a complete passive self-surrender to God.

Although all three of these developments used the Scriptures as a source of religious truth, it was not the primary source of their authority. The Scholastic appealed to logic and church dogma; the popular preachers focused on contemporary issues and drew most of their materials from the secular; and the mystics appealed to the feeling of an experience of the Divine. Thus, all three frequently misused Scripture to make it fit and serve their own purposes.

Scholastic and popular preaching experienced a rapid decline. When the early great preachers passed away, little was left except the forms they had established.

In the scholastic sermons, the over-speculation, the hair-splitting distinctions, the tedious detail of analysis, the frequent sophistries and useless conclusions were at all times ugly faults; but now that the vigor of youth and the freshness of genius were departed this manner of preaching became barren indeed In popular preaching, the seeking after effect, the misuse of Scripture, the coarse humor, that could hardly be tolerated even when accompanied by real devotion and spiritual power, became now in their emptiness almost a hideous mockery of preaching. Further, as to both these modes of preaching, we see what is well exemplified in many spheres, namely, that methods which are rods of power in the hands of masters are rotten reeds in those of feeble imitators.²¹

Mysticism maintained its strength somewhat longer than scholastic and popular preaching. However, it too fell into a state of decay for the most part although it always had its few bright lights in people of humble piety. Also, it had a strong influence on reformation preaching which starts in the early stages of development at the end of the thirteenth century.

From the end of the thirteenth century to the early sixteenth century, these are two parallel developments in preaching. The main stream of preaching which followed the scholastic, popular and mystic forms deteriorated to a state of decay. Dargan gives a good description of the results of this preaching which was the normal diet for worshippers at the time of Luther.

First there would be an invocation or brief prayer for divine guidance, then an exordium or an introduction to awaken interest or pleasure in the hearers.

²¹Ibid., p. 263.

This was not at all or only remotely connected with the subject, and sometimes was far-fetched and bombastic. Then would come the theme, that is, the text or passage of Scripture, read in Latin, sometimes translated into the vernacular, and sometimes briefly explained word for word. This, if extended at all, was called postillating, and was like an ancient homily. Sometimes, if the postil was of much length, it might take the whole time and become the sermon, with only the conclusion added. But more commonly the theme, or announcement and brief explanation of the text, was a subordinate affair, and then came the dispositio, or arrangement, the division and statement of the plan of discourse. With the scholastics this was very elaborate; with others it was subordinate and brief. Next came the argument or proof, or discussion and elaboration, with quotations from the teachers of the church. Here, too, was room for scholastic abuses, but the popular sermons would rather here be more polemic in tone and perhaps briefer. Last would come the anecdotes, fables, stories, comparisons, drawn from nature, from habits of animals and all sorts of things, by way of illustration and impression. Finally would be the admonitio or conclusio, with a brief closing prayer.²²

Thus, in 1522, preaching generally was the remnants and combination of the scholastic, popular and mystical preaching which had blossomed three centuries earlier. Large crowds no longer gathered to hear the preachers and those who did were probably bored and unmoved by the experience. The clergy of this time have been charged with ignorance, immorality, luxury, ambition, laziness, avarice, etc.

The second development in preaching during this same period received its main impetus from John Wycliffe.

²²Ibid., pp. 305-6.

However, he was not the first to point out the evils of the church and appeal to Scripture as the primary authority. There had, for some time, been a growing demand for the preaching of the gospel and renewed religious enthusiasm. The abuses of the church and political powers were so obvious and clear that there was a widespread awakening of the conscience in regard to these evils. Many looked on the state of affairs with shame and grief and came to believe that they had some responsibility to change the condition of the world.

In addition to Wycliffe, there were other preachers who sought earnestly to effect reform.

2. Development as a preacher

Luther began his preaching career in a small monastery in Wittenberg in 1512 at the command of John Staupitz. At first, Luther vigorously opposed preaching and he says that he advanced more than fifteen arguments to Dr. Staupitz as to why he should not preach. These arguments not being successful, he went on to argue that Staupitz was taking his life and that he would not be able to live a quarter of a year if he had to preach every Sunday. Staupitz retorted that if that happened, God could use such a person as Luther in heaven. Later in the same year, on October 19, 1512, Staupitz also appointed

Luther to be his own successor as biblical lecturer at Wittenberg.

Soon the small monastery church could not hold the crowds that came to hear him. And so, at the request of the city council, he was invited to preach at the parish church taking the place of the ailing pastor, Simon Heing. Luther remained at this church until his death in 1546. However, he did travel and preached in many other communities, especially after 1521.

Luther's development as a preacher is intimately related to his development as a student and teacher of Scripture. Early in his studies, Luther preferred the Scriptures to the philosophers and church fathers. As biblical lecturer, the demands for Scriptural study were increased even more. Luther proudly confesses that his life and mind were a captive of the Word of God. Because the Scriptures had so captured his own mind and imagination, it is no surprise that his preaching was expository. Because of his own personal involvement with Scripture and his experience of salvation, his preaching was alive with acute meaning and relevance of the Scriptures both for himself and the congregation. For him, the Bible was a practical book and in his interpretation it was always the practical value upon which he placed the primary stress. Often, he was as much interested in making the Scriptures religiously valuable as he was in getting at

the original meaning. Thus, at the very heart of Luther's understanding of preaching is his conviction that the purpose of preaching is to help the people understand the text.

Another influence on Luther's development as a preacher was the sermons of Augustine and John Tauler. Just how much the thinking, theology and preaching of these men influenced Luther is hard to judge. That they did influence him is evident by the high regard in which he holds them and the many theological positions he holds in common with them. With Augustine, Luther regards human nature as totally corrupted by original sin. There is nothing man can do to save himself. Salvation is wholly the work of God; the soul can only, in humility, be receptive. Salvation is not only the result of God's grace, it is made possible by the life, death and resurrection of Christ. This understanding of helplessness of human nature and its dependency on Christ for salvation is very much a part of this sermon at Weimar.

As was mentioned earlier, Tauler was one of the great preachers of mysticism. As a mystic, Tauler also believed that the soul was corrupted by sin and that a complete dependence on God was the only means to salvation.

A man must take the lowest place as a miserable sinner among his fellowmen, realizing that through

himself he has nothing, can do nothing, will nothing that is acceptable to God, and that all of the good in him he owes to the grace and mercy of God.²³

Thus, faith involves a trust in God's Word and promise of forgiveness. He stresses the inwardness of religion, the direct relation and contact of the soul with God and the futility of external works apart from the inner disposition. Christ is the eternal Logos or Word of God. However, this Word of God is not limited to the written word, for the Logos, through the Holy Spirit can speak directly to the soul.

He insists that ecclesiastical works are of no spiritual value in themselves. True holiness does not consist in outward works, but only by yielding ourselves to the working of God in us. Thus, salvation by good works is false. Rather, good works are not to be done for any reward, but purely and solely in obedience to God's will and from pure love of Him.²⁴

Tauler equates the schoolmen and the zealots for external religion of his own days with the Scribes and Pharisees The former seek to comprehend religion by reason and concern themselves with subtle and profitless speculations, and are utterly barren in experimental religion. The latter lay all the stress on the performance of ordinances, usages, customs in order to augment their self-righteousness The ordinances of the Church, the rule of the monastic life

²³James Mackinnon, Luther and the Reformation (New York: Longmans, Green, 1925), I, 226.

²⁴Ibid., p. 228.

are of value only if they are observed in the right spirit. Otherwise we are no better than the Jews in their religious formalism.²⁵

As a reformer, he denounces the degenerate condition of the clergy, the Church and the world. Although he stresses the inner life of the Spirit, he also stresses the practical Christian life in active love of God and neighbor.

Luther says of Tauler,

Although John Tauler is ignored and held in contempt in the theological schools, I have found in him more solid and true theology than is to be, or can be found in all the scholastic doctors of the universities.²⁶

Mackinnon also feels that Tauler may have had some personal value for Luther's own religious struggle by showing him that the troubled way he had gone in search of peace of conscience, deliverance from the sense of sin and condemnation, was the God-appointed way.²⁷

Luther did not simply copy Tauler nor does he place the theological emphasis on the same points. Rather, Luther was attracted to Tauler because many of the ideas he held, he found developed and supported by Tauler. Thus, Tauler probably served as a catalyst and teacher in Luther's development of his own ideas about the inner Word

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid., p. 232.

²⁷Ibid., p. 233.

and the importance of the works of love toward one's neighbor. In contrast, Luther did not believe that a person, by the Spirit, could directly hear the inner Word without having first heard the outer Word. Tauler was primarily concerned with how the soul could be united with God. Luther was primarily concerned with how a man could stand righteous before God. Also, the places where Luther and Tauler agree does not mean that Luther simply adopted Tauler's ideas; but, rather, as a result of their individual study of Scripture, Augustine and the Fathers, they arrived at similar conclusions at numerous points.

Having said all this in this sermon preached at Weimar, Luther's major theme is also one that is stressed by Tauler and even the supporting materials are similar, i.e., works must be done out of love for God and directed toward one's neighbor. A Christian cannot do this himself but must put his trust in God and what God has done for him in Christ. The similar supporting materials would be the application of the situation of the Jews to the present clergy. The major difference is, Luther attacks all churchly works as evil whereas Tauler does not oppose churchly works but only insists that they be done in the right spirit.

Luther also developed in his preaching style. Up until his captivity at Wartburg, the scholastic form in a modified version is evident in his preaching structure.

His sermons are carefully and logically ordered setting forth the various aspects and meanings of the Scripture passage. Unlike the scholastics, his sermons from the very beginning were expository and never went into the minor details, futile arguments or intricate structure of the classical scholastic sermon.

John Doberstein says: "After 1521 Luther developed a completely new way of preaching."²⁸ This seems to me somewhat of an overstatement. From almost the very beginning, Luther's preaching moved gradually from a highly structured sermon which appealed to authorities, other than Scripture, to a simpler structure with a greater emphasis on Biblical authority.

However, there is admittedly a change in Luther's preaching after Wartburg. Even more than before, the

²⁸John Doberstein, "Introduction to Volume 51," in His Works, LI, xvii. After 1521 Luther developed a completely new way of preaching. He begins at once with the main point and when his text or his time are used up he simply stops. His preaching is expository, not thematic or topical; instead of a theme the basis is a text of considerable length and the aim of the sermon is to help his hearers thoroughly to understand this text. The "suppositio" disappears and in its place Luther announces the text, makes a connection with the last sermon he has preached, points out that his listeners are familiar with the pericope, and comments on the theological importance of the lesson, or discusses its meaning in order to get it clear from the start. Sometimes he begins by pointing out the pastoral and practical implications of the pericope or by summarizing its contents in a proposition; at other times he notes briefly the relation of the text to the church year or admonishes his hearers to give heed to its message. The goal is always that God may speak his Word to

exposition of the major point of the Scripture passage now clearly becomes the goal of his preaching. Much of the formal structure earlier included in his sermon is now dropped. However, his skill at organizing ideas is still very much used, but now in such a way that it is subtly expressed in his development of the meaning and application of the Scripture.²⁹

This sermon preached at Weimar in 1522 is clearly in the context and is representative of Luther's change in preaching. As a result of this change, Luther simply begins with the text and preaches on it until the text or time is used. It is expository preaching at its best and represents a drastic contrast to the Catholic preaching of the time.

the congregation through the sermon. Then in practically all of his sermons the further development follows the text verse by verse or deals with its parts in a simple, direct flow of speech. The inner coherence that holds the sermon together is that everything he says serves to expound and proclaim the text, always keeping in mind the basic thought and thrust of the text. This type of sermon is usually called a homily (the nearest analogy to Luther's method is that employed by Augustine in his homilies), but even this term is almost too precise, because he does not bind himself to treat the text exhaustively word by word, but moves freely, keeping to the important points, and also because his sermons have more unity than most homilies. In every sermon one is made aware of a definite point of view and, despite their seeming artlessness, they are unified in thought and mood.

²⁹Ibid., LI, xvii.

3. Reputation as a preacher

When Luther arrived at Weimar in October of 1522, he was a national hero for large masses of German people. Whenever and wherever he preached, people would travel from neighboring communities to hear him. On occasion he would have to preach outside because the crowds were too large to get into the church. On one occasion the congregation is said to have numbered 25,000 and Luther had to preach from a window in the city hall. From 1512 to 1521, his preaching skills and reputation developed rapidly. When he left Wartburg, his name was a household word in all of Western Europe. The eight sermons he preached at Wittenberg immediately after leaving Wartburg established him as an effective preacher of moderation. He was not only a respected preacher by the common people, but also the reformation minded political leaders held him in high regard.

4. Preaching style

In the absence of modern electronic recordings and even many recorded comments on Luther's preaching style, such an evaluation is quite limited. There are, however, bits of information that give us at least some idea of Luther's pulpit style.

First, it is important to note that he preached from a brief outline with only a few cues, catchwords and notes. This would seem to indicate that while the basic ideas and outline had been thought through, the sermon itself was largely extemporaneous. It is also believed that he frequently had little or no time to make an outline and thus preached completely extemporaneously. This offered him the most complete kind of eye contact with and sensitivity to his congregation. It also gave free expression to his most natural phrasing, vocabulary and personality.

Luther himself says that a sermon should be slow and deliberate for such speaking is more effective and impressive. Because much of what he has to say about preaching is taken from his own experience and practice, it is reasonable to assume he was a slow and deliberate preacher with the results being effective and impressive. He also believed that a sermon should be short and a delight to the hearer. There is equal reason to believe this was the case with his preaching because of the shortness of the recorded sermons and the numbers of people he attracted to hear him.

In terms of physical stature, one student describes him as,

. . . somewhat stout, yet upright, bending backwards rather than stooping, with face upturned to

heaven, with deep dark eyes and eyebrows, twinkling and sparkling like the stars, so that one could hardly look steadily at them.³⁰

Such a stature would both be impressive and authoritative and would help command the respect and attention of the congregation. Also, knowing Luther's lively spirit, it would seem likely that he used gestures to match his words, and if that was the case his gestures would have been active and dramatic.

Dantiscus, a staunch Catholic and one of Luther's critics, after hearing him preach, described him:

. . . eyes were sharp and had a certain terrible coruscation of lightning such as was seen now and then in demonics, his features were like his looks and his speech violent and full of scorn.³¹

On the other hand, one of Luther's students and friends, Albert Burrer,

. . . praises his mild, kindly countenance, his charming address, the piety of his words and acts, the power of his eloquence which moved every hearer not made of stone, and created a desire to hear him again and again.³²

It is also interesting to note Johannes Janssen's (a Catholic historian) evaluation of Luther's preaching.

Luther's assertions and injunctions were all the more impressive and fruitful in results from the manner in which he knew so well how to clothe them. He was a mighty master of the German language. His vocabulary

³⁰Schaff, op. cit., VI, 386.

³¹Ibid., VI, 387.

³²Ibid.

was strong and incisive, his style full of life and movement; his similies in their naked plainness were instinct with vigor and went straight to the mark.

He drew from the rich mines of the vernacular tongue; and in popular eloquence and oratory few equalled him. Where he still spoke in the spirit of the Catholic past, his language was often truly sublime. In his works of instruction and edification he more than once reveals a depth of religious grasp which reminds one of the days of German mysticism One cannot help asking oneself how the same hand which delighted to shatter as with a sledge hammer all that had hitherto been held sacred and venerable, could also touch so tenderly the chords of divine love.³³

In conclusion, Luther was what we today might call a dynamic, relevant preacher. Despite his early fears about preaching, the preacher's gift was his. Vivid imagination, picturesqueness of style, fluency of speech, personal magnetism, passionate earnestness and uncommon knowledge of the religious emotions born of his own heart searching experience--all these he had.

5. Authority of the text

Except for very recent sermons recorded electronically, the authenticity of the text is a major problem and limitation in sermon criticism. Also, the further one goes back into history, the more difficult the problem.

³³Janssen, op. cit., III, 236.; Schaff, op. cit., VI, 389. Eloquence rarely achieved a more complete and honorable triumph. It was not the eloquence of passion or violence, but the eloquence of wisdom and love. It is easier to rouse the wild beast in man, than to tame it into submission.

Prior to 1800 little emphasis was put on word for word recording and the recorder took great liberties in adding, deleting and putting ideas in his own words. In addition to the recording, there is the problem of transmission. Printers' errors in printing or outright alteration to make the spoken word read smoothly, can influence the text. In addition to these problems, there is, as the case with this sermon, the problem of translation, not only of the words but the meanings of those words and the feelings and associations the original words effected.

6. Sermons

We can only estimate the volume of Luther's preaching. He normally preached two to four times a week, but sometimes a great deal more. Sometimes he preached as much as four times a day or during a special season would preach once every day. From 1522 to 1546 it is estimated he preached 70 times a year, though some years he preached as many as 190 times; for a few years during an illness, he preached very little. Today, the Weimar edition of Luther's Works contains over 2,000 sermons. These sermons are taken from: sermons published by enthusiastic listeners and publishers eager to profit by Luther's popularity; the postil which Luther wrote as sermon helps and starters, and stenographic reports by various listeners and students. Although none of these are a complete and

accurate record of Luther's sermons, in those cases where the transcriber was a member of Luther's intimate circle and where we have elaborate notes, the recording is in all likelihood reasonably accurate and gives an honest recording of Luther's preaching.

This sermon at Weimar was recorded by a member of the congregation. It is not known who the recorder was; however, Melanchthon and John Agricola and Jacob Propst accompanied Luther on this trip. One of them may well have been the transcriber. Julius Kostlin, a biographer of Luther, states that in his judgment this is a careful transcript and provides an excellent example of Luther's preaching.³⁴

This sermon, like all his recorded sermons, is not a word for word transcript. On close study, it appears that some full sentences, especially of a connecting nature have been omitted. More common is the connecting of the major ideas of several statements into one sentence, thus omitting the less important words. However, it does appear to be a very complete recording of Luther's ideas and much of it an accurate word for word recording in regard to major points and places of careful distinctions and emphasis.

³⁴Luther, "Sermons, 1510-1546," LI, 103.

III. The Congregation

A. Historical background

As to the members of the congregation at Weimar and their attitude toward Luther, we can, for the most part, only make calculated assumptions. It is known that Luther was invited to preach at the Weimar Castle by Duke John and his son John Frederick through the castle preacher, Wolfgang Stein. He preached six sermons at Weimar from October 19th to 26th, 1522 and preached two sermons at Erfurt on October 21st and 22nd.

Although specific information about Weimar is nil, the most basic implication from secondary comments is that in Weimar Luther had a substantial, broadly based following. Geographically, Weimar is located thirteen miles northwest of Erfurt and ninety miles southeast of Wittenberg, thus placing it between the two most active centers of the reformation. On his journey from Wittenberg to the Diet of Worms in April of 1521, Luther stopped at Weimar and received a very favorable and perhaps even heroic reception from the people. He even received money from Duke John for his trip. The next day was Sunday and he preached to a very large congregation at Erfurt. It would be reasonable to assume that there was a significant number of people from Weimar in attendance at Erfurt. Also, Weimar was a part of Thurgia and Luther was a true

son of Thurgian peasantry and soil. While a student at the University at Erfurt, he probably became well acquainted with students from nearby Weimar, some of whom by 1522 probably had returned to Weimar and were well established citizens. Thus, Luther probably had some close personal ties with some members of the congregation at Weimar.

Politically, Duke John of Weimar was even more favorably disposed toward Luther than his brother, the Elector Frederick. Duke John's son, John Frederick, was an even more active supporter of Luther and was an avid reader of his publications. In fact, he was so much a supporter, there is reason to believe that he had already been working to bring about religious reform in Weimar. In a letter to Spalitin dated March 30, 1522, Luther writes,

I cannot remember what I wrote Herzog John Frederick, except that I advised him not to introduce innovations unless it could be done without giving offense to the weak and that all must be done from love.³⁵

Several implications can be drawn from such a statement. First, that John Frederick had either already gone too far to effect religious reforms or that he had written Luther seeking advice concerning reform. Secondly, it indicates that not everyone in Weimar was in agreement with Luther

³⁵Luther, The Letters of Martin Luther, p. 102.

and for that reason moderation and love must dictate the extent and procedures of reform. Thirdly, it is an early confirmation of John Frederick's support of Luther.

B. Make-up of congregation

The make-up of the congregation for this particular sermon is also a matter of speculation. Since he was there at the invitation of Duke John and John Frederick, it would only seem reasonable that they were in attendance along with their friends and political aids. Luther's general appeal was to the peasants and artisan classes and so they probably made up the largest number. Also, there were probably other clergy in attendance in addition to Wolfgang Stein. And lastly, as was the common practice, there were probably avid Luther supporters there from neighboring communities.

Another possible clue as to the religious situation in Weimar is the absence of any information regarding violence toward church property and clergy. This does not mean that there were no problems in instituting reform in Weimar but it would seem that they may have been minor. On the other hand, it could also be possible that Luther was invited to Weimar to bring about moderation as he had done in Wittenberg seven months earlier. However, the sermon itself seems too moderate in tone and too generalized as to the issues to be directed toward any major problem.

Therefore, it seems that Weimar may have been one of the better examples of a reformed community and church. More than any other city, Weimar could have followed Luther's proposals. It was Luther's belief that secular authorities should rule and thus it was their responsibility to free the church from Rome and to rule it as a responsible Christian. Duke John and John Frederick may well have done this in Weimar. If this was the case, the church at Weimar was definitely in Luther's camp.

C. Relation to the preacher

One of the best clues to Luther's relationship with Weimar is this sermon. This is one of Luther's finest sermons in terms of its positive attitude, constructive recommendation and over all feeling tone of genuine Christian love and respect. Although he does not compromise on the practical meaning of the gospel, he has no "ax to grind" in regard to this congregation. The sermon is solidly based on Scripture, the language is moderate and Luther freely identifies himself with the congregation as one with them in search of salvation and acts of Christian love.

Again it is speculation, but there appears to be at least two positive reasons why Luther accepted the invitation to preach in Weimar. First, because of the importance Luther placed on the role of the secular

authority in church affairs, and because Duke John stood in line to succeed Elector Frederick and John Frederick to succeed Duke John, he would quite naturally want to maintain and develop a good relationship with them. In fact, the way Luther viewed the church, the success of his movement depended to a large extent on the support of the princes. Secondly, if Weimar was the example of reform and gave enthusiastic support to Luther, it would be a source of personal encouragement to preach in Weimar.

However, Luther may have had an altogether different reason for going to Weimar as indicated by Karl Kohler in his book The Journeys of Luther. He asserts that Erfurt was really the central focus of this trip. In two letters prior to this trip, Luther complains of the opponents of the gospel in Erfurt. He instructs the congregation on the subject of the veneration of the saints and admonishes them against forcible innovations. As the opposition and discord continued, Luther thought it necessary to go to Erfurt to exert his personal influence. The invitation to preach at Weimar provided an appropriate opportunity.

IV. Evaluation of the sermon

A. Structure

1. Basic outline

The basic structure is simple: (1) an introductory statement including Scripture and definition of the central theme; (2) Scriptural references and exposition to expand and illustrate the original Scriptural passage; (3) application of the central theme to the contemporary situation; (4) summary and conclusions.

a) Proportion of the parts

The parts are well balanced. The introductory statements and definitions are about 1/6 of the sermon. The two major points, Scriptural amplification and practical application are nearly equal with each occupying about 1/3 of the sermon and the conclusion about 1/6 of the sermon.

b) Movement of the parts

The movement from one part to another is smooth and natural. The movement reflects Luther's preaching theory that a sermon should make the Scripture passage meaningful to the congregation. The movement is determined more by Luther's own reasoning than any prescribed form.

c) Unity of the parts

The parts are united by one central theme. The theme is repeated thirty-seven times and is represented in

each part, but less in the conclusion than elsewhere. Each part is clearly separated from the others, and yet is so completely and directly related to the central theme that there is no question as to its unity with the other parts.

2. Articulation of the parts

a) Development of the parts

Each part develops one main idea as it relates to the central theme. The introduction develops the meanings and definitions of the central point. The first major part develops the central point as it is represented in other Scriptural situations. The second major part develops the application of the major point. The conclusion seeks to develop motivation in the hearer to desire and implement the central theme.

b) Unity within the parts

The unity within the introduction is primarily logical. The unity of the two major parts is primarily historical and the unity within the conclusion is primarily emotional.

B. Content of material

1. Theological orientation

a) Exegesis of Scripture

The passage of Scripture used for this sermon, Matthew 22:37-39, came from the liturgical gospel for this Sunday which was Matthew 22:34-46. This is a good illustration of Luther's typical approach to preaching. That is, he followed the lectionary, preferred preaching from the gospel, picked out the major point of the pericope and stuck to one major theme. The sermon is expository in that it expounds on Scripture, but only on the major point of the passage and not a word by word explanation. Luther's exegetical homework is appropriately not showing, but its results are present. As a result of exegesis, he asserts that the commandments of law and love must agree with one another. He acknowledges that it is impossible for a person to keep these commandments and that God must do it. He says that the law requires we love God and neighbor and works are not rightly done unless this love is first present. And, lastly, he traces the development and meaning of this idea through the Old Testament to the New.

b) Content of the sermon

The content of the sermon is that works are not the means to salvation, especially the ridiculous works which have been required by the Catholic Church. However, it is not that works are bad, works are necessary. The point is, that works are to be done as an outward expression of love.

c) Theological stance

The underlying theological stance of Luther's preaching, lecturing and writing is "justification by faith." It makes little difference what the subject is, this conviction is always made at some point. This sermon is no exception.

Faith is a necessary prerequisite to love. To love God, one must first have faith, i.e., a trust and belief in God and His power of redemption. Once faith and love are established, works show evidence of the faith and love already existent. Thus, for Luther to argue in this sermon that works without love are nothing is only an extension and application of justification by faith. In fact, his closing remarks are:

Therefore, guard yourself against the fool preachers who say: 'Yes, good works will do it. No, first faith must be present in a man. So he who does not follow Christ and also does not love him is condemned.'³⁶

d) Christology

Luther's Christology is orthodox. In the conclusion of this sermon he puts Christ at the center as savior. "He [Christ] stepped down into our mire and

³⁶Ibid., p. 110.

became a man and that those who accept him and love him, fulfills the law and his works are good."³⁷ The love of God and the love of Christ are the same. There are twenty-four references to Christ spread throughout the sermon. In fourteen of the references the name Christ is used interchangeably with God. There are four quotations from Christ, four references to the commandments of Christ and two references to Christ as an example.

e) Paradoxical tension

There are two paradoxical tensions running throughout the sermon. The first is theological and is represented in the central theme, i.e., works are both demanded by the law and yet must be done out of love. To fulfill a commandment is a matter of obligation and not an act of love. An act of love, on the other hand, is not done because it is commanded but because it is desired. The human response to a command is usually one of resentment and hostility. An act of love may break a commandment. Thus, such a position contains within it two incompatible ideas which are in tension with each other.

The second paradoxical tension is of a practical nature. If a person is to be a Christian he must love God and do works of love toward his neighbor. However, he is

³⁷Ibid., p. 109.

unable to do this himself, God must do it in him. The tension here is less clear, but it is powerfully present. The individual Christian is held accountable for his love or lack of love and works; and yet he is to be passive and let God do this work in him.

f) Communication of grace

Grace is the means by which the paradoxical tension is resolved. Most of the conclusion of this sermon is devoted to the communication of grace. This is best illustrated by using Luther's own words.

Christ came down from heaven to make himself known to us . . . Christ suffered and died and rose that you might have the Holy Spirit . . . if you have the Spirit you have salvation . . . Hence if I have the Holy Spirit, I have faith, by which I cling to God . . . Christ bestows his gifts upon you without any merit whatsoever.³⁸

g) Enhancement of relationship between God
and man

There are three basic directions a sermon can take. First, it can be derived from secular authority and deal essentially with psychological and sociological problems. Second, it can be based on Scriptural and religious authorities and deal primarily with theological

³⁸Ibid.

propositions. Third, the sermon can attempt to bring together the human and religious worlds. Probably most sermons fall into this third category, but a large number fail because they are unbalanced. Either they place the overwhelming emphasis on one or the other. Also, many simply are unable to bring the two together in a working relationship.

In addition to being scripturally and theologically orientated, Luther was also very practical with a deep understanding of human feelings and day to day problems. Luther believed in a "living Word" and by that he has in mind that God has a direct impact on men and actively relates to them in their situation. One of the primary reasons Luther could have such an impact on the time in which he lived, was because he could show a direct relationship between Scripture and the social situation. His preaching was what we today would call relevant. Now to deal with the question.

In actuality, the only persons who can verify if this sermon enhanced their relationship with God would be the individual members of the congregation. Thus, this judgment in the case of this sermon, has to be based on a theoretical analysis of a probable response.

As already mentioned, Luther's life was devoted to proclaiming "justification by faith." This in itself was, for Luther, the heart of the God-man relationship. In this

sermon, Luther destroys any attempt at self-justification and in conclusion makes some excellent statements which would illicit faith. Having already referred to these statements above and knowing something of Luther's speaking ability to lead and convince a congregation, I would judge that this sermon did a superb job in enhancing this congregation's relationship to God.

2. Central thrust

- a) The one central unifying point of the sermon - the essential message

The one central unifying point of this sermon is that works without love are nothing. Every part of the sermon is devoted to develop, clarify and promote this one theme. It is a very clean sermon in that there are few, if any, materials seeking to make any other point. One of the principles that Luther emphasized for preaching was that preachers should stick to the main theme of the Scripture passage. In this sermon, Luther eminently follows his own advice.

- b) Development of the central thrust

The way Luther develops the central thrust in this sermon is an illustration of how he changed his preaching from the earlier scholastic style. In this sermon he sets

right out in the beginning to teach the listener the meaning of the Scripture as he understands it.

The Scripture passage is "You shall love . . . God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind . . . and your neighbor as yourself . . . "

Matthew 22:37-39 This is immediately followed by three definitions. The first definition defines the gospel, the paradoxical tension and relevance to the congregation.

The Gospel consists in two questions. First, what is the greatest commandment, by which one is saved, and second, what the law requires; and these two must agree with each other.³⁹ And he who wants to be a Christian must know this.

The second definition establishes Christ's commandment to love neighbor as self and the third definition states what the law requires, namely, to love God and neighbor.

Therefore, "If the works are not done out of love, then they are absolutely nothing."⁴⁰ This concludes the introduction which clearly establishes the central thrust based on the Scripture passage of the morning.

Next, Luther moves directly into the first major part of the sermon where he uses other Scripture and commentary to expand and show the depth of meaning of the original Scripture passage. Here he follows his own

³⁹ Ibid., p. 104.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 105.

exegetical principle that Scripture should be interpreted in the light of other Scripture.

His first argument is that a Christian must be willing to do even a shameful act to show his love of God. This is derived from Scripture concerning circumcision among the Jews. Circumcision is a foolish thing and is nothing to God or Christ. But it was commanded by God that the Jews may show their love for Him.

He then extends what a Christian must be willing to do out of love for God. He uses the illustration of Abraham who was willing to go so far as to kill his own son. Again he restates that the killing and sacrifice are nothing to God, but that a Christian, out of love for God, should be willing to do even the most contemptible works.

This is followed by a summary statement which gives a brief history of circumcision and how it illustrates that works which are done out of love are pleasing to God.

The Old Testament commentary is logically followed by New Testament passages that shed light on the central theme. The New Testament passage adds yet another dimension as to how far a Christian must go in his acts of love; namely, he must be willing to break the law. The illustration is appropriately Christ and disciples picking grain on the Sabbath. Out of love, the disciples preferred

to break the Sabbath than leave Christ. To this is also added, probably because it is so similar, the example of David who ate the holy bread.

The first part of the sermon is now completed by returning to the original Scriptural passage to reiterate the central theme. In the first half of the sermon Luther has clearly established that the meaning of the "Great Commandment" is that works without love are nothing, and that after a person first loves God and neighbor, even the most contemptible works may have to be done as an expression of that love.

The next development of the central thrust is to apply its implications to the present situation. This is done in two parts. The first, which by far is the longest part, is an attack on the Roman clergy. Here Luther piles illustration upon illustration of how the clergy have their commandments from the pope and as a result their lives are all wicked. In opposition he argues that a Christian has his commandments from God and his works are all directed to help a neighbor in need. The second are three short definitions of what it means to love God with all of one's heart, soul and mind. These do not give specific applications of the central theme, but, rather, indicates the proper attitude a Christian should have toward God which would, of necessity, result in good works.

The conclusion is designed to motivate the members of the congregation to love God. To this point the basic development of the central thrust has been to make it intellectually appealing. But to love is also an emotion and the conclusion is designed to effect a love for God in the lives of the congregation. At this, Luther is a master.

He immediately identifies himself with the congregation so that what he has to say from this point on is a common struggle for all. His first announcement is that all are condemned because when a person is confronted with the love of God he feels his own inability and powerlessness to love. Thus, he identifies and brings out in the open the most probable response to the command to love. This helps the congregation to know that they are not alone in their hypocrisy and makes this natural response acceptable and prepares them to move to the next point. He adds to his own observations the observation of Paul who also acknowledges these human limitations.

Next he concludes, based on the gospel, that the Jews and clergy already referred to are condemned because they sought salvation by works. At this point he has cut off all possible external routes to salvation. All are condemned because they do not love God, and those who seek

salvation by works are also condemned. Thus, at the probable height of emotional frustration, he says without introduction

Christ came down from heaven to make himself known to us, He stepped down in our mire and became a man He who accepts Christ, acknowledges and loves him, he fulfills all things and all his works are good; he does good to his neighbor, he suffers all things for God's sake.⁴¹

Thus, the problems and frustrations of the whole sermon and the fulfillment of the main point that works must be done out of love, now have a very simple, easy answer for the emotions to cling to, namely, Jesus Christ. Also, to love Christ is the response of faith.

To further strengthen the Christian, Luther states that what Christ did fills them with the Holy Spirit and this Spirit gives them the strength to do all things. This gift they receive without any merit of their own so that it is open to every member of the congregation regardless of his sins.

The last paragraph is a prayer for faith and a warning against foolish preachers.

3. Argument

a) Logical

⁴¹Ibid., p. 109.

(1) Reasoning

(a) Consistency

Luther has often been referred to as a man of contradictions. Luther was impulsive and was a man of the moment. His contradictions grow out of his process of maturation in thinking, his attempts to be faithful in his exegesis of Scripture even when it conflicts with other Scripture, and his attempts to always meet a new crisis as a result of his reforming activity. Thus, Luther himself was not so concerned about being consistent as dealing with an immediate situation be it a new Scripture passage or a new social crisis.

However, Luther is quite consistent in any one sermon or social situation. The inconsistencies develop as a result of major experiences or turning points which are sufficiently substantial to change his thinking. This flexibility and adaptability was one of his strengths, though it presents a major problem to anyone seeking to set forth Luther's ideas.

In this sermon, Luther's reasoning is very logical and the sermon is totally free from contradictions, except of course, the necessary paradoxical tension. This sermon is also consistent with Luther's preaching since he left Wartburg in March and thus very much stands in the context of Luther's reforming activities of 1522-24.

(b) Completeness

The argument is thorough. The natural questions that arise in one place are answered in another. There are no problems or questions that are obviously bypassed. It is straight forward. The necessary details are covered, and there are no loose ends left dangling. The conclusions are stated only after adequate facts and expository materials have been presented.

(c) Consecutiveness

The order of the presentation is logical and easy to follow. The examples and exposition are in logical order and each expands the meaning to a deeper level. In fact, this sermon is so well organized, I get the impression it was either not the first time Luther preached it or his transcribers put the materials in good, printable order.

(d) Cogency

All the parts of this sermon center on the one idea that "works without love are nothing." He does not stray from this point, though the various parts of the sermon relate to this in quite different ways.

(2) Definitions

(a) Clarity

There are six explicit definitions in the sermon. They define: the two issues in the passage of Scripture, the law and commandment of Christ; what the law requires, and what is meant by loving with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. All of these definitions are concise and exceedingly clear. Even more important than these short definitions is that most of the sermon is, in itself, a definition. Nearly every phrase is used to define and clarify his central theme.

(b) Intelligibility

Another one of Luther's personal assets was his ability to clothe profound concepts in concise, simple language. Here again Luther is a good example of his preaching theory. He viewed the congregation as so many blocks and geared his preaching to the common people. This entire sermon from beginning to end is very intelligible. There is never any question what he is talking about or the point he is trying to make.

(3) Examples

(a) Illustration

Luther uses thirteen specific examples in this sermon, all of which come from either the Scriptures or the contemporary scene and all of which would be familiar to the congregation. Each of the examples are specifically related to the main theme. Also, the examples from Scripture are directly compared to the examples from the contemporary situation and the logical conclusions are drawn. One illustration of this from the sermon is:

Therefore we conclude by the authority of this Gospel, that monks, nuns, and priests have all been led and turned to blind outward works, and they are all stuck, though we can accomplish nothing through them. For anyone who does not do his work out of love is blind. So it was also with the Jews and the Pharisees; though they were fine persons and honest men, they nevertheless were blind. So we accomplish nothing whatsoever by outward works. To be a monk, nun, a Carthusian, to go to Rome or to St. James, all is nothing. He who does not acknowledge his sinfulness, like the Pharisees and Jews, is condemned.⁴²

(b) Appropriateness

The examples used are appropriately related to the central theme. Their relation to the central theme is immediately clear and they illustrate the precise point Luther is wanting to make. The examples are used in good taste, are used for their full meaning and take advantage of existing feelings already present in the congregation.

⁴²Ibid.

They are effectively used to secure intellectual assent and emotional acceptance.

(c) Number

Luther used thirteen examples in the sermon, twelve of the thirteen were located in the main body of the sermon and one in the conclusion. The number is sufficient to give broad support to his position without overwhelming the audience with illustrations. Also, they are short enough and used in such a way that he could make the most of each example by adding definition, exposition and application.

b) Emotional

(1) Adaptation to congregation

As already indicated, Luther was personally quite familiar with the congregation. He was probably in Weimar on a number of occasions, and carried on considerable correspondence with Duke John, John Frederick and Wolfgang Stein. It is also probable that Luther had met members of the congregation while preaching in other cities. Also, Luther, through all his associates and correspondence had a pretty good understanding of what the situation was in the Evangelical congregations who looked to him for leadership. The emotional tone of the sermon would be in

agreement with what little information we have about the Weimar congregation. It was positive, moderate and supportive.

There is no indication that Luther had to readjust his approach while preaching, though he no doubt had the ability to do so.

(2) Consistent with the central theme

The emotional tone is very much in keeping with the materials being presented; so much so, that the very way he presents the objective materials concerning Scripture, catholic clergy and love of neighbor in themselves illicit favorable emotional response. To combine the objective presentation and emotional appeal in such a powerful way is a rare talent, and Luther had that talent.

(3) Appeals to the congregation

Luther's appeal for change of attitude and action is powerful and subtle. He at no point criticizes the congregation directly. Rather, his attack is focused on the clergy who are prime examples of how a Christian ought not to live. He implies that the congregation, through no fault of their own, have been wrongly taught. He then appeals to their hatred for the clergy and to their own personal desire to be a good Christian, to love God and neighbor.

c) Ethical

(1) Authority of the speaker

Aristotle wrote: " . . . there is no proof so effective as that of character."⁴³ This sermon is very much an expression of Luther himself. Luther is true to his words. He believed what he preached. He himself was an example of a Christian who follows the commandments of God and who had rejected the commandments of the pope. He had discarded the works required by the church to do those works that help a neighbor in need.

(2) Authority appealed to

Holy Scripture, as God's Word, is the authority appealed to in this sermon. The basic position of the sermon is based on Matthew 22:37-39. This is in turn interpreted and expanded by additional Scripture.

(3) Use of materials

The way Luther generalizes, interprets and distorts the facts is one of the serious criticisms that can be made concerning much of his writing and preaching, including this sermon.

⁴³Lester Thonssen and A. Craig Baird, Speech Criticism (New York: Ronald Press, 1948), p. 384.

This misuse of the facts is especially true in his evaluation of the Catholic Church and its clergy. If we were to believe Luther, we would believe that the entire church and clergy were utterly void of any Christian virtue. The situation was bad and the church and clergy were in a state of extreme decay. However, there were devout, dedicated, honest clergy truly seeking to be a good servant of Christ. Also, not all the popes were corrupt and there were monastic orders in the church concerned about and working to meet human need.

Commenting on Luther's generalizations about the Catholic Church, James Mackinnon writes:

Luther assumes that the facts are so notorious that it is superfluous to particularize. They are, he repeatedly says, common knowledge, too well known to need proof, and may be left to speak for themselves.⁴⁴

4. Richness of materials

a) Background of knowledge

Most of Luther's preaching and writings are highly existential in content. They are a reflection of his own experiences, studies, ideas and feelings. The materials for this sermon are drawn from three sources. The Scriptural references, definitions and exposition are a result of his intense and thorough studies. The references

⁴⁴Mackinnon, op. cit., I, 122.

to the Roman clergy and the pope come from his own experiences and observations from his own days in the cloister to the present. And his conclusion regarding faith and love are a sharing in sermon form of his own experience of salvation.

- b) Use of grammatical forms, illustrations, analogies, parallel forms, examples, word choice, etc.

Luther was a preacher to the common person. His selection of words and materials were, to a large extent, dictated by what the common man could understand.

The use of materials not only serves to clarify the central thrust, but can easily be carried over in the minds of the hearer to many practical applications. For example, if God regards circumcision as a foolish and shameful act, would he not also regard pilgrimages, indulgences, etc. also as being foolish and shameful acts. If Christ's disciples saw fit to break a commandment to remain with him, should they not break some of the religious laws of the church to hear the Word of God and become disciples of Christ?

This sermon is well balanced with grammatical forms and exposition so that it is alive, concrete and moves at a good pace.

C. Type

This sermon is both deliberative and a speech of reinforcement. It is deliberative in the sense that one of its major functions is to persuade. 5/6 of the sermon contains materials designed to convince the congregation of the basic premise. The delivery tone was in all probability decisive, reflecting that Luther himself was thoroughly convinced of the point he was making. And the materials used and the use of strong, passionate native language was sufficient to make a strong, positive impression on the congregation.

The sermon is also a speech of reinforcement in that it deals with insight and feeling levels. The new insight is the perspective of the relationship between law and love and what this means in terms of application. There are two major feeling levels appealed to. The lesser of these two is to create and maintain a hatred and disrespect for the Roman clergy. The main thrust is to appeal to the higher feeling of love for God, Christ and neighbor.

D. Purpose

1. To inform

One of the purposes of this sermon is to inform. This stems from Luther's emphasis that people should know

the Word of God. Thus, the congregation receives information from the Scriptures and definitions of its meaning.

2. To persuade

A greater emphasis however is placed on persuasion. To persuade the congregation that works without love are nothing, that a Christian must be willing to do even contemptible works for the sake of love, that the Roman church is all evil and condemned and that the proper expression of love is to help a neighbor in need.

3. To motivate

A third and also important purpose of the sermon is to motivate. Up to the conclusion, the motivational appeal is that a Christian who loves God must express this love by active assistance to neighbors in need. The conclusion is designed to motivate the members of the congregation to have a sincere love and faith in Christ.

E. Style

Luther's use of vocabulary and word choice have already been discussed. Because of the limitations in the recording of this sermon, it is not possible to evaluate

his composition of sentences or paragraph structure. His use of imagery and ornamentation in this sermon are nil.

F. Delivery

The delivery of this particular sermon is impossible to evaluate apart from what is generally known about Luther's preaching. This was discussed above and there is no reason to assume that his delivery at Weimar was any different.

G. Effects

1. Immediate

The immediate effects of this sermon cannot be determined from information currently available. It would appear from the sermon itself, however, that the effect would be one of positive response and promote the meaning of the faith.

2. Long term

The long term effects of this particular sermon are not known. However, the long term effects of preaching this type of sermon in a number of churches lead to the establishment of Evangelical Congregations with their own church structure apart from the Roman Catholic Church.

H. Memory

Luther usually preached from a brief outline or no notes at all. Because of the unusually clear logical development of this sermon, it would appear that he did use some kind of an outline. However, because a sermon such as this would be so much a part of Luther's thinking, it is quite possible also that he only had a clear outline in his mind and nothing in front of him. The only thing known for certain is that he had no record of the sermon two weeks later, as indicated by the following statement written to Spalatin on November 3, 1522.

I have no notes of what I preached in Weimar and Erfurt, and do not require to write them, for you know all already, because I have taught nothing but faith and love there--except that I was asked in Weimar to make public what I had once preached about the kingdom of God and worldly authorities. It has been printed and dedicated to Prince John.⁴⁵

The curious problem here is that somebody obviously did take very careful note of these sermons witnessed by the fact that one of them is the basis of this evaluation. It would surely seem that Luther was aware of this recording and that the sermon indeed would have been available to Spalatin.

⁴⁵Luther, The Letters of Martin Luther, p. 102.

CHAPTER VII

IMPLICATIONS OF LUTHER'S DOCTRINE OF THE WORD FOR CONTEMPORARY PREACHING

It is the purpose of this chapter to spell out the relevance of Luther's doctrine of the Word to contemporary preaching. The temptation is to just write a summary because so much of what Luther says is so obviously relevant that it seems it cannot be said in a better way. In fact, this is one of the key characteristics of Luther's greatness. However, I shall attempt here to repeat as little as possible of what has already been stated. Rather, I shall attempt to relate the preceding information to contemporary preaching as I have experienced it as a layman during the past five years.

I confess that I make this kind of evaluation with a great deal of concern regarding its high level of subjectivity. It would be easier and more objective to evaluate a contemporary sermon in light of Luther's theology and ideas about preaching. But in reality, how many of us remember "a sermon" on which our faith and life is built? Rather, we have some kind of composite of information and principles of faith that have developed over a period of time. Also, the sermons we hear are distorted by our own interpretations and as a result, may be quite different from the sermon preached. Thus, this

evaluation, like most layman's sermon evaluations, is based on generalizations and impressions which may, on the one hand be completely inaccurate, but on the other hand, is what in reality is left over from listening to sermons Sunday after Sunday.

Regarding my own subjectivity, I have long thought the sermon a very important part of the worship experience. In fact, that is the primary reason for this paper. My friends who are in the preaching ministry say my standards are too high and I am too critical. Also, having studied Luther for some six or seven years, I have evaluated sermons during the past five years through the colored glasses of Luther's theology and concepts on preaching. None of the preachers I have listened to were well acquainted with Luther's theology and consequently used different criteria for preparing and evaluating their own sermons.

Another problem regarding this type of evaluation is: what is the status of contemporary preaching? I can only speak from a very small piece of the action. Therefore, it will be up to you, the reader, to decide if my evaluations of contemporary preaching and how Luther relates, applies to your experience.

More than anything else, the relevance of Luther's doctrine of the Word to contemporary preaching is his emphasis that a proper distinction must be made between the

law and the gospel. The thing that has kept coming to my mind over and over again as I have listened to sermons during the past five years is, the preacher is not making a distinction between the law and the gospel and as a result, the gospel is not being proclaimed.

Even in those sermons where the preacher has attempted to present the gospel, in the final analysis he presented the law. This is done by attaching strings to the gospel. These strings are attached primarily by demanding that we must "have faith" to receive the promises of God. While theologically this is the case, the problem is that faith is presented as a human work. It is something that a man does by his own free will. By presenting faith as a matter of human effort, the preacher presents the radical demand of the gospel. Luther calls this the "strange work" of the gospel because as radical demand, the gospel goes to the heart of my being and demands the very things I cannot do--such as to have a pure faith and a clean heart. There is nothing wrong with contemporary preaching presenting this strange work of the gospel if it is also accompanied by the proper work of the gospel, namely, the gifts of God. But when, as is so often the case, the radical demand of the gospel is left to stand under the pretense of being the true gospel, it leaves the congregation condemned and hopeless.

To be able to distinguish between the law and the gospel is important to contemporary preaching for many reasons, but the most obvious is because preaching itself is commonly called a proclamation of the gospel. It is a verbal communication of the "good news." That is, preaching at its very heart and center is nothing else than the proclaiming of God's love. Preaching that does not proclaim the gospel is not really preaching, but simply a form of speech making.

The gospel, by its very nature, exists as gospel only when it is set in contrast to the law. Therefore, to preach the gospel necessarily depends on this contrast being made. Although the distinction between the law and gospel is not the content of preaching, it is in the process of preaching itself where the distinction between the law and gospel comes into focus. Preaching is, as it were, the battleground where the law and gospel enter into conflict and in the process of the struggle, become separated, identified and clarified. Thus, the gospel as the redemptive Word of God, depends on this distinction between itself and the law.

As Ebeling so clearly points out:

. . . . This means that making the distinction in practice between the law and the gospel is not fortuitous and incidental to the process of preaching, but is what is really meant to take place within it. But if the process of preaching is what it claims to be, that is, the process of salvation, then as the distinction is made between the law and the gospel, so

the event of salvation takes place. And a confusion of the two is not a misfortune of little significance, a regrettable weakness, but is evil in the strict sense, the total opposite of salvation.

In order to express these strange sounding propositions in all their rigour, let us add that to fail to make this decision, to confuse the law and the gospel, is the normal occurrence, the state of affairs which exists everywhere. This is the situation with which Christian preaching is always faced and which is the only cause to its taking place, but Christian preaching is also constantly being drawn into it and is in continual danger of being submerged in it through mistaking its task. For the confusion becomes wholly evil when the very preaching which ought to distinguish the law and the gospel always means the abandonment of gospel, leaving only the law. Yet when the law is not distinguished from the gospel, but is itself presented as gospel, it is no longer properly recognized as the law. The final outcome is that law itself is lost, because the law is all that remains. On the other hand, the gospel is of its very nature a distinction between the law and the gospel. Thus the gospel is not present in a pure and undefiled form when it stands on its own, untroubled and undisturbed with its relation to the law never considered. In such isolation, the gospel could not be the gospel. For the gospel only comes into action when it does so in distinction from and in opposition to the law--and when as a result the law is really the law.¹

Also, as Ebeling indicates, the failure to make the distinction between the law and gospel in preaching is the state of affairs everywhere. Sermons today are by and large expositions of the law, if not intentionally then by the failure to distinguish between the law and gospel. Frequently, pastors seem more interested in raking their congregation over the coals than concern for applying the

¹Gerhard Ebeling, Luther (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), pp. 117-8.

gospel to their wounds. However, there is also a great deal of sensitivity among pastors for the hurts of the congregation. Unfortunately, even when the pastor is seeking to console his congregation, Christ is usually presented as demand rather than a redemptive gift. Christ is present more as an example for Christians to live by than as a revealer of God's love toward men.

Contemporary preaching tends to be more concerned about the ethics of Vietnam than the forgiveness of those who have had to make the decisions in this atrocity. It is more concerned about the ethics of sex than the lives of the people searching for love and identity. It is more concerned about tithing than about serving. It demands love of neighbor but forgets to communicate God's love except as demand. That is, since God loves me so much it is only Christian for me to love my neighbor.

The real point is a matter of balance. If the sermon is in fact a battleground between the law and gospel, in contemporary preaching the law emerges as an uncontested victor. The reverse would be just as unfortunate. That is, if I only heard of the love and mercy of God and was not made aware of the demands of God, my understanding of God's will for my life would be just as distorted. The law and gospel must be kept in balance with one another if the law is going to be pure law and the gospel, true gospel. The only way these can be kept in

balance in preaching is for the preacher to be able to distinguish between them and keep this in mind during sermon preparation and delivery.

The following is a true illustration of what can happen when the distinction is not made and the law wins. The story comes from a friend who worked as an associate pastor in a large church this past year.

The pastor had decided that he was really going to make a point of the evil of the war in Vietnam. Just before the sermon, the congregation stood and sang "America the Beautiful." The sermon focused on the immorality of the war and in particular, the defoliating process. The sermon powerfully made the point comparing: on the one hand, how we cherish the beauty of America, and on the other, how we can do such a terrible thing to such a small, relatively defenseless country. God's law, at least as one pastor saw it, was courageously proclaimed. But where is the gospel? Is there no "good news" even in this very painful situation?

That day, there was in the congregation, a young woman whose husband had been killed the week before on just such a defoliating mission. Her husband was doing what he thought was right. The person relating the story said he had counselled with this woman several months picking up the pieces and reassembling the life which the sermon that

morning had shattered. She went to church looking for hope and grace and understanding and left utterly condemned.

The point is not that the pastor should have avoided the moral issue. The Word of God as law and as radical demand needs to be set forth. The point is rather, that the gospel of God's love and forgiveness should also have been proclaimed. He should have pointed also to Christ's cross and resurrection and the saving power of God even in the ultimate sacrifice, pain and sorrow. Therein, this contemporary pastor could have benefited by distinguishing the law and gospel.

Had he distinguished between the law and gospel, even the law he was seeking to proclaim would have been more powerful. Luther was convinced that no law can strike so deeply into our hearts as God's goodness in the gospel. At the same time, there is nothing more comforting and healing in times of anguish than to hear the gospel of God's love. Had God's love been proclaimed for all, including the enemy, whether in Hanoi or Washington, the sermon would have been more powerful and, at the same time, a redemptive proclamation of the Word of God.

What then is the content of this gospel that is relevant to contemporary preaching? Although Luther understood the gospel to be the redemptive deeds of God, the ultimate redemptive deed was Jesus Christ. Therefore, to

understand this gospel which stands in contrast with the law we must look at Jesus Christ.

Luther's Christology is basically orthodox, but there is what Althaus calls a "new element" in his Christology; and, it is this "new element" that is particularly relevant to understanding Luther's concept of the gospel and its relation to contemporary preaching.

This new element is the way in which Luther views Christ. In his own search for salvation, Luther was deeply concerned about how God felt about him, Martin Luther. He asked such questions as: "What is His relationship to me?" and "What does God intend to do with us sinful men?" As a result of this personal struggle, Luther came to know Jesus Christ as the "mirror of the Father's heart." For Luther, the decisive thing about Christ is that God has opened His heart to us in the person, activity and history of Jesus Christ and thus gives us certainty about how He feels about us and what He intends to do with us.

The key passage of Scripture for Luther's Christology is John 14:9, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father." He paraphrases:

You must see and know God just as you see and know Me. In brief, you must not imagine or suppose that God can be apprehended and known in any other way or by any other means than through Me.²

²Martin Luther, "Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, 1537," in His Works (St. Louis: Concordia, 1961), XXIV, 59.

Luther also adds:

Whoever sees Christ with the eyes of faith also sees the Father with those eyes; for he meets the very Person in whom the Father also dwells bodily, as St. Paul states (Col. 2:9), and in whom He reveals His whole heart and will.³

Thus, Luther concludes: "As you now hear and see Christ revealing Himself to you, you can rest assured that the Father is disposed toward you in like manner."⁴

Luther's primary concern was that we see the Father in the man Jesus. This he saw as a process of assention and penetration, "through the heart of Christ to the heart of God." That is, we ascend from Jesus to God and through knowing Jesus as a man we penetrate to the heart of God. As Jesus related to people in his day, so God relates Himself to us today.

Because Jesus Christ is the Son of the Father, His activities in relationship to men are nothing else than what the Father Himself wills and does. Thus, Pelikan concludes that for Luther,

Christ was not primarily an Example for men to imitate through moral obedience, but an Exemplar in whom God had manifested His work and His Word. It is not what Christ did that believers must do, but what was done to Christ is what believers must learn to recognize as being done to them.⁵

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 61.

⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan, Luther the Expositor (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), p. 62.

Althaus arrives at a somewhat similar conclusion when he writes, "True faith in Jesus Christ is characterized by the fact that it relates Christ and his work to the believer's own existence and it's "for me" and "for us."⁶

Luther writes:

The fact that he is Christ means that he was given for us without any of our works. He gained the Holy Spirit of God for us and made us children of God without our merits, so that we might have a gracious God, become Lord with him over everything that is in heaven and earth, and in addition have eternal life through him. That is faith and that is what it means to really know Christ.⁷

The Gospel is relevant to contemporary preaching because it affirms and expresses God's love "for us" "right now." It is the good news of God's love, not sometime back in history, though it is that as well, but it is for me, today. For Luther, the Christian Faith is a living faith and is intensely relevant to human experience at every level. Luther sees the God-man relationship as a personal relationship made visible in the man Jesus Christ. By seeing God's heart and will toward men reflected in the life of Jesus Christ, it makes this love something I can comprehend and appropriate. In Christ, God shows us that He loves us in our totality: mentally, physically, spiritually, psychologically, sociologically and anything

⁶Paul Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 192.

⁷Ibid.

else that is a part of our being. In brief, Christ shows me that God's fundamental attitude to my life and existence is love and acceptance of who I am and that He is redemptively working in my life at the same time to bring about a new creation. There is nothing I can or have to do to merit this love, it simply is. Nothing has to change or be eliminated before we qualify to receive God's grace. In Jesus Christ's ministry, we see God's love for all men regardless of their personal problems or status in life.

Luther's understanding of God's Word as gospel is relevant to contemporary preaching because it can help the pastor to distinguish between Christ as law and Christ as gospel. By understanding Christ as the mirror of the Father's heart means that if Christ is to stand at the center of the sermon, the love of God must be proclaimed. This understanding of the gospel stands in contrast to most contemporary preaching. Because most preachers do not make the distinction between the law and gospel, Christ is usually proclaimed as law. Christ is our great example. He is our teacher, the model after which we should pattern our own lives. An illustration of this is a quote from a sermon published recently in the "Pulpit Digest."

I earnestly hope and fervently pray that in the days and years to come we will love each other as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. In this way there will be no strangers among us and no outsiders. No one will be forgotten. We will truly be God's children, and Jesus Christ will be known among us because we have shown his love in our lives.

And . . .

Jesus forgave those who put him to death. He forgave the ones who spit in his face. He commended to God's forgiveness those who had broken both moral and spiritual laws. We simply cannot have a meaningful communion of saints unless we forgive both our friends and our enemies.⁸

On the one hand, these statements regarding Christ are perfectly correct statements of law. However, when we read the whole sermon, we find that at every point where Christ is presented he is presented as law even though there are obvious indications at other points that the preacher is striving to preach grace and love. This sermon is a clear illustration from contemporary preaching that there is a need for the pastor to be able to distinguish between the law and the gospel.

Luther sometimes makes the distinction between the law and gospel in this way: the law has been written on our hearts and thus is a very part of our being, the gospel on the other hand is shown to us in Christ. Because the law is a part of our natural make-up and reason there is a "natural" tendency to preach the law. For the pastor to preach the gospel there must be, within himself, a constant struggle between the law and the gospel. Otherwise, the law simply takes over and the gospel is lost. To proclaim

⁸Harold Kaser, "I Believe in the Communion of Saints," in Pulpit Digest, LII: 395 (May 1972), 36.

the gospel one must always keep his eye on Christ and God's love active in Christ.

The best way to keep one's eyes on Christ and to distinguish the gospel is to be a student of Scripture. Luther saw Christ everywhere in the Scriptures. As a result of his intense involvement with Scripture, Luther became an expository preacher which helped to keep his focus on the gospel.

Very little of the preaching I have heard has been expository. There is, of course, a Scripture reading as a part of the service and frequently the Scripture passage is somehow either related to the sermon or at some point is dragged in by the ear. But very few contemporary preachers attempt to define and clarify Scripture and apply it to the life of the congregation. Most frequently the Scripture passage is used to illustrate a point rather than being the heart of the message. To help keep his attention on the gospel as well as on the law and distinguish between them, the contemporary preacher could benefit by being a student of Scripture and preaching expository sermons.

It seems that the contemporary preacher does not trust the Scripture message to be relevant to our twentieth century culture. Therefore, in attempts to be relevant, Scripture is bypassed in favor of more contemporary materials. This bypassing of the Scripture as the very heart and center of preaching causes a multitude of

problems, not the least of which is this matter of distinguishing between the law and gospel. When the Scripture is abandoned and the pastor sets out on his own to "preach the gospel," it is precisely the opposite that happens. His natural reason takes over and it is the law which is proclaimed. The natural reason has a tendency to want to "make sense" out of everything. Reason is uncomfortable with a paradox and with tension and conflict. Reason wants to set up its own little system where everything fits and where there is an answer for every question.

As an expositor of Scripture, Luther was anything but a systematic theologian. Rather, his concern was to proclaim the "heart," the essential message of a passage of Scripture and what God is saying "to us" in that passage. There was an existentialism in Luther's preaching that is so applicable that his sermons are still relevant today, four hundred years later. He was not afraid of contradiction, paradoxes and the like. Rather, he held in tension God's law and God's love, the internal and external humanity and divinity and in doing so, reached to the depths of human experience. In brief, Luther trusted God's Word over human judgment. He trusted the Word of God not only to be accurate but also as relevant to the needs of Christian people. Luther did not believe that human nature has changed since the fall of Adam. Thus, Luther was

absolutely convinced that the Scripture message is relevant to the contemporary preaching in any age.

By proclaiming the central message of a Scripture passage and remembering that Christ is the heart of Scripture, the contemporary preacher is also likely to be more timely than by selecting his sermon topic by sitting in the study trying to figure out what to preach on the following Sunday. It is not possible for a pastor to know everything that happens in the lives of the members of his congregation. If he only preaches to those problem areas of which he is aware, there is a good probability he will completely overlook some crucial areas. Luther was so convinced that God's Word is relevant that he would say the contemporary preacher can trust the Scripture as being relevant even though he can't think of one person in the congregation to whom the heart of the Scripture passage may relate. It is not uncommon for this kind of sermon to be one of the most helpful the pastor has preached.

Not using Scripture as the heart of the sermon can lead to the sermon becoming a speech rather than a proclamation of the gospel. The sermon can very easily become a psychological, philosophical, ethical or religious speech with the gospel left out entirely. Such speech making is dangerous when it is passed off under the pretense of being proclamation. It leads to heresy and confusion to the point where a Christian congregation may

not even know of the gospel, the good news of God's love for them. Such a distortion of preaching may lead to either moralism or license. The God-man relationship and God's Word as law and gospel are lost. The dynamics of the Christian faith that results in works of love and the experience of love are abandoned.

And too, there is the question of authority. If Scripture is not used as the basis for the sermon, then the authority and validity of what is said rests either on the preacher himself or some other source. Again, this bypasses preaching as the proclamation of the Word of God. It makes the sermon man's word and not God's Word. Luther's concern was not how men regarded himself or what other men had to say about his life, but rather, what does God have to say about my situation. What is God's perspective on these things that happen to us human beings and about our very nature?

Another factor is the teaching function which is built into expository preaching. The Scripture is the one common authority available to all Christians. Very few members of today's congregation are students of Scripture. Contemporary preaching which centers and is built on and around and upon a Scripture passage exposes the layman, in depth, to the Word of God, the content of the Christian faith. If this is missing in a sermon, one of the greatest educational opportunities available to the church is

neglected. However, it is more than an educational opportunity, it is an opportunity to proclaim God's Word as law and God's Word as gospel and thus proclaim the purity of the faith.

In summary, I just want to underscore again what I have been pointing out in these last few pages. Luther's doctrine of the Word of God is intensely relevant to contemporary preaching, particularly his emphasis on distinguishing between the law and the gospel. Also, that Luther believed that God's Word is relevant to people of all ages and to all human situations, it needs only to be properly proclaimed and appropriately applied. The phrase "properly proclaimed and appropriately applied" was the key to Luther's effecting preaching and may well be the key to effective, meaningful and powerful proclamation of the Word today.

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